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Vol. II. Single Number.

BEADLE AND ADAMS, PUBLISHERS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 32.

Bob Woolf, THE BORDER RUFFIAN; OR, THE GIRL DEAD-SHOT.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "THE DOUBLE DANGERS," "CLOVEN HOOF," "BUFFALO BEN," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TEN HOURS TO LEAVE.

"HELLO! in thar!"

A great stretch of level plain, lying in the scorching rays of the summer sun; a cabin standing alone and isolated in the center of the blazing waste; a group of perhaps two score of rough, uncouth looking horsemen, drawn up before the cabin door—all helped to make up the wild scene to which we would introduce the reader.

The horsemen, comprising some of the worst looking and most ruffianly characters on the rough frontier, both white and red by color, were headed by a large, massively proportioned desperado, with a long, haggard face, blood-shot eyes, straight, black Indian hair, which hung long and matted over his neck and forehead; a fierce black mustache, and a large mouth. He was clad in buckskin, from top to toe, and, taken altogether, was a character whom one would not care to meet in a wild spot like this, so far from civilized posts, backed, as he was, by forty evil-faced and brutal-looking companions.

It was this leader who had uttered the salutation which opens our story, as he reined up before the door of the silent and apparently deserted cabin.

"Hello, thar!" he repeated, in a louder, fiercer tone.

Still no answer.

"Hello, thar!" I say, drat ye!" he again yelled, his dusky face growing darker with anger. "If ye don't show up purty soon I'll dismount and smash that door in, cuss me, if I don't!"

All was silent as the tomb. Save the hot, scorching breath of air that fanned across the vast level plain, and caused the grass to swish lazily, not a sound was to be heard.

"Pr'aps they've klim out, already, Cap'n," suggested a half-breed, by the leader's side.

"No!" cried the outlaw

chief, "I know better. Eph Tubbs seed ther gal hyar only last night. Hey! hello, there, you lazy-bones! D'y'e want me to smash that door in?"

At this juncture the single window-shutter was opened a trifle, and a pretty, half-grown girl thrust her head out.

"What do you want, Bob Woolf?" she demanded, eying the motley gang of border-ruffians. "What would you have here?"

"Ha! blast ye! Thort ye'd better answer my salute, did ye?" growled the desperado. "Why didn't ye open up when I called first, you little rip?"

"Because I did not see fit to. What do you want of me?"

"Don't want nothing o' you, Nell Allen. I kin down here on purpose to see yer dad. Is he in thar?"

"Yes, he is, but you cannot see him, nor anybody else. He and mamma are both in bed, sick."

"What d'ye s'pose I keer, whether they're sick or not? Tell Bill Allen to show up hyar, or I'll tumble that door down, sure's my name's Bob Woolf. Cum, now, off with ye!"

"No! you heartless brute, I will not. Papa can not see you. Give me your message, and I'll tell it to him when he awakens from the stupor into which he has just fallen. But you cannot come in here nor see him either."

"Blast you, I'll see if I won't, ye little shet-tiger!" cried the ruffian. "Dismount, boyes, an' stave in thet 'ar door! D'y'e hear? Stave it in!"

"Hold! Bob Woolf!" cried the girl, her eyes flashing fire, "hold! Come in here if you will; but, first, let me tell you that in so doing you will expose yourself and men to the king of all scourges—small-pox!"

Had a cannon-ball struck the border chief he could not have been more startled.

In an instant his companions were spurring away over the plain at a safe distance, and he, too, rode back from the door several rods.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the girl, "what brave men you are!"

"Cuss ye!" roared Woolf, foaming; "hev ye been lyin' to me?"

"No! I would not lie, Bob Woolf, to save my own parents even. I value my word too much for that. Both my poor papa and mamma are dying of the terrible disease. I, thus far, have been spared, though I may take it yet."

"I hope ye will!" replied the chief, with a brutal laugh. "So, I s'pose, I cannot see the old man, eh? Wal, then I'll tell ye my purpose in comin' here to-day. Rather, I'll read it to ye, as I've got it all writ down in black an' white here on these 'ere slips o' dockyment."

From a pocket inside his buckskin hunting-shirt the outlaw now produced two small sheets of paper, from which he read, in a loud, clear voice:

"Whereas: in the natteral course o' human events, when one man stands in the way of the interests of forty other respectable and honorable citizens o' Colyrraddo an' Kansas, as Bill Allen, the spotter, hes bin doin' fur the last six months—

"Resolved: That it becomes the duty of sed citizens, to themselves, an' state, and country, then, to remove, or cause ter be removd, sed obsticle, and—

"Resolved: That such bein' ther case, and we bein' ther present representertives o' sed citizens, we should meet en secrift tribunal, an' pernownce the sentence—



THE GIRL DEAD-SHOT.

"Whereas: We did meet, an' commute, and weigh our words, an' hev—

"Resolved: the following sentence upon the he'd o' Bill Allen, the Kansas Spotter: From the time of the hour of reading this paper, before him an' his family, we give him *just ten hours to leave*—to cl'ar out o' this region! Ef he ain't gone by that time he'll *fry in his cabin by perrarie-fire!*"

As Bob Woolf concluded, he looked at the little white face at the open window-shutter.

"D'y'e understandin' et?" he grinned, riding closer. "Did ye hear me?"

"You would not *burn us up*, would you, monster?" gasped Nellie Allen, in horror.

"Yes! I would, an' will, too, ef ye, an' yer dad, and mama don't get outen this afore night! Reckoleek now! Yer dad's ben ther worst spy an' hunter we've ever had ag'in us, an' we shan't show him enny mercy. Jes' ten hours from now, my fellers'll set ther grass on fire, 'bout a mile away, an' all aroun' this ranch. If yours ar' all away, safe, so be it. If yer hayr still, why then you'll all sizzle!"

And without another word the ruffian wheeled his spirited horse, and dashed away, followed by the rest of his gang. Soon they had faded from view, far away on the hazy horizon of the plain.

Ten hours to leave!

Ten hours—and two sick persons lying nigh unto death, in the lone cabin, 'neath the rays of the torrid August sun!

Nellie Allen groaned aloud as she threw open the door and shutter when the ruffians were well away and there was no more danger.

One hour dragged by.

The burning sun reached the meridian and glared down its hot breath upon the baked plain as if to set it afire.

The grass was as dry as powder and swished lazily as an occasional scorching puff of air swept along. Not a sign of animated life was to be seen.

The birds had flown to the leafy coverts of distant forests; the prairie fowls had burrowed deep down out of sight, and even the buffaloes had gone further northwest to their "wallows."

Two—three—four—five—six hours winged past; the sun set red and dry in the scorched horizon and threw her last scattering rays upon the scene ere it sunk from sight.

Then the shadows of night began to steal around, and objects at a distance grew indistinct. A few coyotes ventured to sneak out upon the plain and utter their customary evening barks.

At the lone cabin silence had reigned supreme during the day, but now, as the shadows thickened upon the earth, the small agile figure of Nellie Allen came to the door and swept the vast plain with tearful eyes.

"Dead!" she moaned, crouching on the little step, and bursting into tears and sobs anew—"dead! dead! Oh! God, why didst thou send this affliction upon me? Why cast me thus upon the world, an orphan in a wild, uncivilized country, with not a friend to seek in this last hour of sorrow! Dead! my kind, good old father, and my tender, loving mother—oh! this is more than I can bear!"

And she shook with sobs and the moans of grief till she rocked herself asleep, unconscious!

Unconscious that the hour of the great fire was drawing nigh. Unconscious that even now the minions of Bob Woolf were hovering upon the outskirts of the plain preparatory to commencing their horrible work.

Unconscious of all—everything save the fact that two ghastly, distorted victims of small-pox lay inside the cabin awaiting burial.

When she awoke it was with a startled scream.

The vast plain was as light as day.

"Way off to the north, to the south, to the east and west—in fact, all around her, circled an awful seething sea of flame.

The outlaw had kept his word.

"Oh! God!" cried the girl, her great hazel eyes uplifted to the starlit heaven, "hear me swear unto you that, as sure as there is a God and a ruling power on earth, I will have revenge for this heartless act of the outlaw chief and his murderous gang. Aye revenge! revenge! Though I must leave the bodies of my parents to roast in the flames, I will escape and live to spill the blood of every accursed wretch who was with Bob Woolf to-day; and will re-serve him for my last victim. Girl though I am, and young and feeble, I will sweep like a hurricane into the robbers' ranks and take a life for every word that the desp'radio chief uttered ten hours ago! I swear it! before high heaven! I swear it!"

And then she clasped her hands upward in silent prayer.

On came the sea of fire, nearer and nearer. Gigantic columns of smoke rose above the flames of flame and hid the sky from view.

A heavy north wind had risen, and this, together with the roar and crackle of the great fire, made a noise not unlike the raging voice of the tornado.

Naturally the northern portion of the fire neared the cabin very rapidly, and in less than twenty minutes after Nellie Allen had first discovered it her cabin home was in the midst of the destructive flames!

And where was she—the last one left of the once peaceful family?

Far away to the south, speeding with the wind, like a startled deer, she followed close in the wake of the southern boundary of the fire, now here, then there, and like the veritable hurricane, she swept on, everywhere. She was between two fires, both wafted in the same direction.

Consequently, when she passed over the boundary line where the southern fire had been set, and struck out on the hot and black-charred ground, she had naught to fear from the pursuing element behind her.

CHAPTER II.

A PHILADELPHIA LAWYER.

FIVE years later.

The evening stage, with its load of passengers for the mines, and well-filled mail-bags for the miners, had just arrived at Dwight's. A motley crew of men it brought, too. Fortune-seekers, in the persons of old and grizzly hunters and trappers; adventurers and gamblers, who followed the different "excitements;" young and inexperienced youths, from city and country, and older and more experienced miners from the worn-out claims below. Also, there were a few females, who roamed from "strike to strike," for reasons best known to themselves.

Dwight's was a new and important diggings, in one of the richest gulches about Pike's Peak, and consisted of four buildings, a grocery store, a blacksmith shop, a broker's office and bank, and a tavern, under the immediate supervision of Jonas Dwight himself.

Dwight's was not the *real* name of the new city, reader, but, for several reasons, we see fit to call it so.

The mines were about half a mile to the north, but as we shall have nothing to do with them we will not tarry to describe them at this juncture.

To the south of Dwight's, an open, level lay of country spread off, until it reached the great plains, and this was quite thickly settled, and several imposing residences had recently sprung up, for times were prosperous, and money flush.

Among the score of passengers who filled the stage that night and sought shelter from the drizzling rain, inside of the tavern, was a finely formed, athletic fellow, dressed in citizen's attire, and very prepossessing in general appearance.

His intellectual face was smooth, save a brown mustache; his eyes gray and ferret-like

in their glances, and his hair brown and curling. Taken as a whole he was a change from the general class of miners and new-comers, who frequented Dwight's, and it is unnecessary to say that the worthy host noticed this fact at once, and marked him down, forthwith, as a speculator.

He paid for his board a week in advance, and then registered his name in the large book kept for that purpose:

CECIL BURNETT,
ATTORNEY AND COUNSELLOR AT LAW,
PHILAD'A, PA.

"Hum!" said Jonas Dwight, carelessly glancing at the signature, "a Philadelphia lawyer, hey? Yes. Don't expect any practice out in the diggings, do you?"

"Oh, no," laughed Burnett, in his pleasant way. "I've other and more important business which brings me out into this remote region."

"Hum! yes," nodded the host, as the young man strolled on about the great apartments; "thought so! Hum! yes."

Dwight's tavern was supplied with a faro-room adjoining the bar-room, and into this Cecil Burnett sauntered to pass away time.

The apartment was already half-filled with dark-visaged miners and gamblers, who were engaged in various games, such as faro, keno, poker, and euchre.

Here the miner would nightly come and venture his day's earnings at the gaming table.

Here experienced sharpers sat night and day, and fleeced the ignorant toiler of his gold, and stored it away, or spent it at the bar, as the case might be.

For perhaps an hour Burnett watched the progress and result of different games; then he retraced his steps to the bar-room, which was now empty, save the presence of the proprietor, Jonas Dwight, a large, florid person, of forty years, with bloodshot eyes, and long whiskers.

"Have you a little time, sir, which you could spare me?" inquired Burnett, lighting a cigar, and seating himself at the table nearest the bar. "I have a few inquiries to make that I might as well prosecute ere I sleep tonight."

"Well, y-e-s, I might spare ye a few minutes, provide ye're able to pay for it," said the host, reflectively. "My time is worth—let me see—well, about two dollars an hour."

Burnett laughed.

"You must be making a tolerably fair living at that rate," he said, sarcastically.

"Oh! I am!" ejaculated Jonas, with a flourish. "I'm gittin' independent rich, and I've only been here two months at that. Brisk times here, now, sir."

"Yes; so it appears. Well, I guess I can hardly afford to talk with you at that price. I'll seek somebody else, and maybe I'll have better luck."

"Oh! don't be offended, sir. I might be induced to come down a little. How would one-and-a-half strike you, now, for instance?"

"Too high!" said Burnett, shaking his head, negatively; for at a glance he saw the type of a man he had to deal with. "I'm too poor to stand that."

"Too poor, eh? Well, say one dollar, then, for the hour?"

"No! still above my means. I'll tell you what I will do. I'll give you at the rate of fifty cents an hour for your information."

"Done!" cried Jonas, taking a seat at the table. "Go ahead."

The young man laid a gold watch on the table before him.

"Did you ever see or hear of a man in this locality?" he began, "by the name of Luke Rice?"

"Luke Rice!" echoed Jonas in amazement. "Yes, certainly. I've sold him many a quart o' Kentuck Luke Rice! Yes. Why, bless you, man, Luke's one o' the best customers I ever had when I kept in Cherry Run."

"What kind of a looking man is he? Tall or short?"

"Short; a regular little dwarf."

"Describe him otherwise."

"Well, he's got red hair, black eyes, a scar across his cheek, an' is lame in the right foot."

"Hem! Yes, that's my man," muttered Cecil Burnett, noting down a few lines with a pencil, in a note-book. "Now, where does he live?"

"In Cherry Run."

"Where is Cherry Run?"

"Well, it's down across the plain about sixty miles from here."

"Sixty miles, eh? Have to procure a guide, wouldn't it?"

"Reckon so. Lots of Sioux on the plains, and then Bob Woolf holds out there, too, occasionally."

"Who is he?"

"He? Why, he's the great outlaw."

"He is, eh? Well, now, where will I find a guide?"

"Dunno where you'll find one. I can find one for you if you will pay me another dollar."

"Agreed. Who is it?"

"A gal. Hurricane Nell."

"Hurricane Nell! Humph! A queer name for a female."

"Yas; an' a queer female for the name, ye'll find."

"Of the fallen angel type, I suppose, eh?" said Burnett, relighting his cigar carelessly.

"No! No! You're mistaken. A purer, prettier, braver girl never breathed, sir. I've known Hurricane Nell since her escape from the great prairie fire years ago, an' could swear that her honor is as bright as ever was the honor of a saint. She's an odd one, though. Her whole life is devoted to the one terrible object, revenge. She roams through the wilderness in various disguises, and every few weeks some one finds a dead outlaw, wi' her death mark upon him."

"She must be a singular character, from your description," mused Burnett, half aloud; "and a rough one."

"So she is. She goes and comes at will. No one dares to cross her path. She is a modest and pleasant companion, to those she fancies; but to her enemies she is an actual terror. Why, sir, I once see her shoot a feller, in yonder, just for forcibly kissin' an Indian gal, g'inst her will. Since her dad died she's insured herself to every sort of hardship and peril, and I'd wager this whole establishment to-night, if necessary, that she could outrun, out-ride, out-shoot, out-lasso, out-yell, out—"

"Hold on, for mercy's sake!" cried Burnett, putting up his hands, with a laugh, "hold on—don't!"

"What? Why?" asked Jonas.

"That will do. Don't tell me any more, until I have seen this wonderful creature. I have learned, sir, all I want to know in just a quarter of an hour. Your pay, at the rate of fifty cents per hour, would be just twelve and a half cents exactly. There are thirteen." And with a quiet smile the lawyer deposited thirteen coppers upon the table.

"Well, b-y Jericho!" gasped Jonas, thunderstruck; "I've heard said that no one could compete wi' a Philadelphia lawyer, and I believe it now!"

CHAPTER III.

A SON OF AN EARL—HURRICANE NELL.

BURNETT laughed.

"Well," he said, "I won't be hard on you, for you have given me some important information. Here is a ten dollar bill for you. Will that do?" And he laid a crisp new bank note, which he abstracted from a plethoric wallet, into Jonas' hands.

"Oh! thank you, sir, thank you, sir. You are too generous," apologized the tavern-keeper, graciously. "I am ever so much obliged. My dear sir, allow me to retract my words, for I now firmly believe that almost any one can get ahead of a Philadelphia lawyer!"

The evenings being long and the noise about the tavern considerable, Burnett resolved not

to retire until quiet prevailed. So he sat in the bar-room and puffed away, meditatively, at a fragrant cigar and listened to the hilarious shouts and songs in the adjoining apartment.

About nine o'clock a queer, stoop-shouldered old man opened the outside door and staggered into the bar-room. As he scanned him from head to foot, Burnett thought he had never seen such an odd specimen of humanity before. His form was bent and apparently feeble, and clad in rags of the most greasy kind. His face was covered to the very eyes with a thick, bushy, iron-gray beard; his eyes shaded by a pair of green goggles, and a large slouch sombrero was drawn over his forehead until it touched his nose, which was red as the blood beet in color. He leaned heavily upon a stout staff or cudgel for support and staggered about as if drunk.

"Ha! Uncle Sam, is that you?" saluted Jonas Dwight, from behind the bar. "Were ye bin the last week?"

"I have been unto the mighty land of the Serraka, Sir Jonas," replied the man, in a wheezy voice, "to beg sustenance from the rich Sioux chief by that name."

"Didn't find the Indians of a very charitable turn, did ye?"

"No! no! They are unwilling to aid a poor but honest fellow-creature. Sir!" and here the stranger turned with outstretched hands toward Burnett, "wouldst open thy heart to the deserving poor and contribute to the worthy charitable institutions of the Aged and Infirm Home? I pray thee, sir, to open up your heart!"

"Who are you, old man?"

"My good sir, I am now a poor beggar upon the world. Once I held mine head as high as any of my fellow-creatures. Once I was as rich as our good friend Jonas, here. But the withering hand of ill-luck and poverty cast its terrible blight upon me and stole away my fortune. Do not think me the ordinary beggar, sir, for I am not. Noble and royal blood runs in my veins. I am the only surviving son of the great Earl of Aberdeen—yes, sir; the son of an earl in straitened circumstances. I seek relief only from those who are spending that which should go to their suffering wives and children in foul drink and at the gambling-table!"

"A very praiseworthy cause, too, you plead, I should say. Here is a dollar, uncle. Take it and give it to your poor."

"Nay, young man. Thou hast a free heart, I see, and a godly sum of filthy lucre-money; but I'll take not a cent, sir. Put it in your pocket and keep it there. There's robbers and cut-throats all around you; so beware!"

Burnett started violently and returned his pocket-book to its place at once, while Uncle Sam limped on into the gambling room without another word.

The young Philadelphian arose to follow, when his host said:

"If you wish to procure Hurricane Nell for your guide, sir, you can do so by bargaining with the old tramp; he's her agent!"

"Humph! does she not come out so that one can see her?"

"No; or, that is, she never comes to the diggings often to my knowledge. Bob Woolf has his spies posted out about here on the watch for her, so she seldom dares to show her face here. Once, however, she did come here, and boldly dared the whole crowd to lay a hand upon her; bluffed every one of 'em, sir! That was when she shot the feller for smackin' the red-skin gal."

"I should really like to see her," muttered Burnett, as he sauntered away into the next room.

Betting on different games was at the height of its excitement, and no one paid the least attention to the pleadings of *The Earl*, as he went from table to table.

Burnett kept close behind him and watched the results of begging in this rough, half-civilized audience.

At last Uncle Sam stopped at the end of a table at which two bloated, brutal-looking ruffians were seated, engaged in a game of euchre.

"A quarter, kind sirs, to assist the son of an earl in straitened circumstances?" asked the old man, leaning upon his cane, and peering down into the fellows' faces.

"Git out, curse ye!" cried the larger of the two, rising and administering the beggar a heartless kick; "I'll assist you, you old cuss!"

With a groan the old man staggered and would have fallen had not Cecil Burnett quickly caught him and supported him to a seat.

"Sir!" he cried, turning indignantly upon the ruffian, "you should know better than to kick an old man like this."

"Who'n the devil'r you?" growled the fellow, rising quickly and confronting the young man, with doubled fists. "Wat ails ye, anyhow? Give me any o' yer sass, an' I'll smash ye in the snoot, curse me ef I don't, sure's I'm, Bob Woolf!"

"Not much you won't, Mr. Outlaw!" exclaimed the young lawyer, coolly and firmly. "I'm not afraid of you nor your gang."

A flendish glare flashed from the eyes of the ruffian, and, with a lightning-like movement, he drew a long knife from his belt.

"Ain't afraid on me, hey? Why, you young cuss, I'll rip life out o' ye in two jiffies for a chaw o' terbacker! Climb outen this, now, ef ye don't want me to kill ye!"

"No! I'll not move a step; so touch me if you dare!" Cecil cried.

With an infuriated cry the big border-ruffian flung himself forward upon his adversary, and the cry, "a fight! a fight!" rung through the room.

By a dexterous movement Burnett avoided the intended blow, and then, with a quick, cat-like spring, planted a solid blow between his opponent's eyes.

Woolf tumbled to the floor, and lay in a silent heap, the blood spurting from his nostrils and mouth in a sickening stream.

"Gentlemen!" cried Cecil Burnett, turning and facing the gang of low-browed, swarthy ruffians, who were crowding around, "are there any more of you anxious to step into yon bleeding wretch's shoes? If so, come forward, one at a time."

An angry, muttering growl was the only answer; so, taking it as a negative, the young stranger readjusted his cravat and turned to the seat where he had left the bruised *earl*.

To his surprise he at once perceived that he was gone.

Donning his hat, which had fallen to the floor during the affray, he joined Jonas Dwight, who was returning to the bar-room, from which he had been summoned at the cries of a fight.

"The beggar—where did he go?" was Cecil's question.

"Slid out, I reckon, during your tussle with Woolf."

"He did! Hang the luck; I had not yet spoken to him of my wish to procure a guide."

"Oh! as to that, why, probably he'll be back here by to-morrow night."

"Is there no other guide whom I can procure, or no other way by which I can get word to this Hurricane Nell?"

"Not as I know on. Uncle Sam'll be back to-morrow evening, I judge. He comes pretty regular. In the meantime, boss, I'd advise ye, as a guest and my friend, to lie low—keep shady!"

"Why?"

"Oh, because. As long's ye stay in Dwight's arter this row to-night yer life won't be worth half as much as the money ye've got. Look out for Bob Woolf."

"Bah! I'm not afraid of that wolf. He is more blow than bite."

"Yes; maybe he is; but I notice that Cap'in Bob's got a heap o' friends to back him."

At this juncture they entered the bar-room and as they did so another figure entered also, from the outside door.

"Good Saints!" gasped Jonas, grasping Cecil nervously by the arm, and toward the new comer pointing, "d'ye see her, boyee? That is her—*Hurricane Nell!*"

CHAPTER IV.

HON. FELIX GROVER'S—THE NEWS.

In the open level lay of country to the south of Dwight's, which we have before mentioned, were a number of new residences, erected by well-to-do farmers, and speculators in some cases, for their own occupancy.

Farms had been opened here prior to the discovery of gold by emigrants, and now, even in the height of the excitement, excellent crops of tasseling corn, waving and ripening hay and grain, and fields of earlier harvested winter wheat, helped to make up a scene at once attractive and enlivening.

In a beautiful modern-built mansion, set down on the edge of a magnificent grove of cottonwoods and facing a small, purling stream, was the home of Hon. Felix Grover, estimated to be the wealthiest man in the vicinity of the great mines. He had come here immediately upon the discovery of the precious veins of gold and had bought up an immense tract of rich land in the vicinity of Dwight's, and then, as the tide of adventurers swept that way, had leased it out to companies and miners, making a big figure. No one knew the enormous percentage he had realized, but it was hinted that it was enough to make him a millionaire.

Subsequent upon this action he had built a bank or broker's office at the settlement of which Dwight's tavern was the starting point, and established a paying business thereat; exchanging greenbacks for gold at a premium, and also keeping the earnings of various miners in his safe from week to week, or until they saw fit to otherwise dispose of them, for a certain per cent.

But about two weeks previous to the occurrence of the events related in the last chapter—"Governor" Grover—as he was habitually called—was attacked with a severe spell of the gout, and consequently was compelled to relinquish the performance of his duties at "the bank" to the management of his trusted clerk, Aubrey Lee, who was, we may as well add, also the prospective husband of Lotta, the "Governor's" daughter, and the prettiest little lady for miles around.

Not that Lee was betrothed to the young heiress, for such was not the case; but it was pretty generally understood between Grover and his wife that eventually they would have the shrewd young clerk for a son-in-law.

On the morning after the tussle between Cap'n Bob and Cecil Burnett in Dwight's tavern, Aubrey Lee hurriedly left the bank, mounted a horse belonging to him, and galloped swiftly down across the country toward "Governor Grover's."

He was a finely-formed, good-looking personage, of perhaps eight and twenty years, and would have been pronounced by a casual observer really handsome, but for a singular, habitual drooping of his eye-lids over a pair of saucy eyes, when spoken to.

His dress was neat and stylish, his manner courteous, and his speech indicative of a polished education.

On arriving at Grover's, he found the family lingering over a late breakfast, with the exception of Miss Lotta, who was practicing in the morning room, at a new piano. She was a lovely blonde, of some nineteen summers, just budding into the rosy bloom of early womanhood; and, what with her sweet smiles, her brown, lustrous eyes, and soft, shimmering hair, set into bold relief by an elegant form of exquisite development, she made a radiant picture of youthful and healthful beauty.

"Governor" Grover was a hale and hearty old gent of sixty, and Mrs. Grover a quiet, retiring woman of ten years his senior.

After lingering a moment by the piano, with Lotta, and making a few gallant remarks

on her skill, as a musician, Aubrey Lee joined the family at the breakfast-table.

A few words of greeting, then the clerk said:

"As soon as you are done, sir, I would like to have a few moments' private talk with you, if it will not tire you too much. Something of importance, you see!"

"Nothing gone wrong at the bank, has there, boy?"

"Yes! allow me to wheel you into the library, here, and I will explain all."

This was soon done, and the clerk closed and locked the door behind them.

"Now," he said, taking a chair, and seating himself beside the "Governor," in a business-like way, "prepare yourself for a shock, for I have bad news. The bank was robbed last night of every cent of money!"

Governor Grover covered his face with his hands, and uttered a horrified cry.

"Robbed?" he gasped; "impossible. You are joking, boy!"

"I heartily wish I were, Mr. Grover, but, an hour ago, when I went to the office, I found the safe unlocked, the papers scattered over the floor, and the whole of your money, together with the amount deposited since your confinement by the miners, counting up in all to the tune of five hundred thousand dollars—gone! Yes, sir, *gone!* The robbers took nothing but the money; but of that they took every penny from the safe!"

"It seems *incredible!* How could they have gained an entrance into the office, much less the safe? I fail to see!"

"Duplicate keys in both instances, sir, I presume. Now, then, I have a proposal to make to you: You will remember, I think, that several weeks ago I told you of an inheritance left me by an English uncle! Well, that has been turned into cash, and netted me nearly one million of dollars, sir, which is now awaiting my order in an eastern bank. As I have no present use for it, I can *lend* it to you, and settle with these miners, and satisfy them. Otherwise, as they are very excited over their heavy losses, you are in danger of being mobbed if you cannot show up their deposits!"

"And you will lend me this money, my dear boy?" gasped the "Governor," grasping him by the hand; "bless you! bless you!"

"Yes, Mr. Grover, I will pay back to them what is due, and lend you enough to re-start in business again on certain conditions."

"Name them, Aubrey, name them, and if they are within reason I will agree!"

"Well, in the first place, I shall require a mortgage on this residence and the hundred acres of land connected with it—"

"To which I say 'yes!'"

"And if I find the robbers of the bank, and recover the stolen money, to give me a third of it down—"

"Agreed," nodded Grover, slowly.

"And lastly, you must promise me the hand of your daughter, Lotta, in marriage!"

The old man put up his hands at these words. "No, no! Aubrey Lee!" he replied in a faltering voice, "I'll *promise* you nothing of the kind. If the dear girl loves you enough to marry you of her own accord, so be it; but I'll promise or bind her to no man. She shall be her own judge in the matter. Have you ever broached the subject to her?"

"No; but I intend to ere I leave to-day, and if she does not promise me, sir, then—"

"Then what?"

"Then I fear I shall withdraw all my propositions. My sole object in the offer I make, is that I may become your son-in-law!"

"Aubrey Lee," said the "Governor," meditatively, "I'm half inclined to believe that there is some scheme or plot in this matter!"

The clerk started a trifle, then flushed hotly. "Beware, Mr. Grover, how you imply unworthy or base designs. I do not care to be thought a villain no more than would you!"

"Oh! excuse me, my dear boy; I meant nothing at all, at all," said the old man, apologetically. "I'll talk with the girl at once; but stay. First, just draw that desk here, and I'll write up a mortgage and have it done

with. I hate to do it, but I suppose there is no alternative."

"None at all," Mr. Grover. "Even now, doubtless, the miners are waiting for my return. Should I not ever show my face in Dwight's again, they'd *butcher* you, out of spite, ere another sunrise!"

CHAPTER V.

THE QUEEN OF THE LASSO.

The figure pointed out by Jonas to the young lawyer was of medium height, with a form of exquisite contour, that was attired in a close-fitting suit of buckskin, tastefully fringed and ornamented with Indian beads, which all the more enhanced the beauty of the supple body.

You saw an almost purely classic face browned to a nut hue by the wind of the prairies and sun of the plains, from years of constant exposure—a firm, yet sweet little mouth, eyes now black as the raven's wing, and at other times of the hazel color, a small haughtily-poised head, and a wave of dark chestnut hair, that hung in a luxuriant mass upon her shoulders. In a belt about her waist were thrust a pair of revolvers, and also fastened a coil of rope—the lasso.

"That Hurricane Nell? Impossible!" said Burnett. "Why, that is a man!"

"A girl in man's clothing," laughed the host. "Come forward, and I'll give ye an introduce!"

They now advanced toward the beautiful maiden, who was about to retreat, as she saw a stranger with Dwight.

"Hold on, gal!" he exclaimed, seeing her inquiring look; "it's no one as ye need be afraid of. 'Low me to make you acquainted wi' Cap'n—Cap'n—what is it, boss?"

"Burnett, sir, Cecil Burnett."

The maiden acknowledged his courteous bow with a careless nod.

"Ye see," went on Jonas, "thet he is wantin' a guide across to the valley—Cherry Valley; an' I told him as how I thought ye might accomodate him, being's you are the only guide hyarabouts as is 'quainted wi' the route."

"Yes, sir," replied Hurricane Nell, addressing Burnett, and at the same time keeping her eagle eyes riveted on the door of the inner apartment. "I am at liberty to engage with you. My horse is ready at any moment."

"Then we will start in the morning," said the young lawyer. "I suppose you know the habitation of Luke Rice, when you see it?"

"I do. I've been there several times since papa died."

"Well, it is to this Rice's cabin that I wish to be conducted."

Hurricane Nell started violently, but by a swift, fierce effort, mastered and concealed her agitation from the two men.

"Where shall I find you in the morning?" continued Burnett.

"At the edge of the grove, which you will see in the prairie-valley, from the tavern door, here. I will be in waiting."

"I suppose I shall need a fast horse and a rifle?"

"Yes; above all, come well armed. Many unseen dangers lie between these diggings and Cherry Valley. It is there, in the midst of a howling wilderness, that are enmeshed a gang of the most ferocious ruffians who roam in these territories. Both the red-man and the white are equally savage and bloodthirsty."

Burnett shuddered.

"Then, are you not afraid to boldly enter such a region?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Burnett; I absolutely fear *nothing* of late years. My life is one of constant peril, and, strange as it may seem, sir, the greater the danger, and the more exciting the adventure, I glory the more in it. You will doubtless think me a wild and strange creature, without a heart or a woman's instinct, but I cannot help it. As one is accustomed to roam through this life, his or her habits will bind

them to their lot and make them love it all the stronger."

"Ay! ay! I doubt not," mused the young man, looking steadily yet unconsciously into her expressive eyes, until she was forced to drop them, and a crimson flush mantled her forehead.

At this instant loud curses were heard in the next apartment, and Jonas Dwight hurried away to ascertain the cause.

In a moment he came rushing back, his eyes sparkling excitedly.

"It's Cap'n Bob!" he said, quickly, "an' he's just recovered from the knuckle-winder ye give him, Cap, an' he swears he'll have your heart out before morning. I judge ye'd better go to your room, an' keep cluss, ef ye want to weather et through. An' you, gal, ye'd better scoot, too, for there's forty o' his pals here tonight, an' ye two uns couldn't hold out ag'in that many, I tell ye."

"True!" exclaimed Hurricane Nell; "so *I'll* go. And you, sir"—to Burnett—"had better go to your room, as Jonas has said. I'll be in waiting for you, at sunrise, by the edge of the grove. Keep an eye out for Bob Woolf, and knock him down *again*, if he dares to molest you. Good-by."

Morning dawned brightly over the diggings and smiling landscape around Dwight's.

The mellow sun rose out of the bed of molten gold on the crest of the western horizon, and threw her soft, warm rays athwart the then yet dew-besprinkled grass, and glanced down upon the purling stream, by the edge of the glistening grove, on the leaves of which still lingered the traces and rain-drops of the previous night's storm.

Not a score of rods distant from the imposing mansion of Hon. Felix Grover, sitting upon her clean-limbed and spirited black horse, in under the shelter of a giant sycamore, at the creek's edge, was the radiant young beauty, Hurricane Nell.

She was still attired in the buck-skin suit, and a jaunty beaver cap covered her waving head of hair. A rifle of superior workmanship lay across the pommel of an elegantly mounted saddle, and two revolvers were in the holsters, in addition to the brace in her belt. A long, toughened lasso hung at her side, and another at the neck of the saddle. She evidently was all in readiness for the long, swift journey.

There was a soft, dreamy expression in her lustrous eyes, as she sat there—something wistfully expectant as she glanced up toward the little gathering of shanties on the hill, which composed all there was of Dwight's settlement.

She was watching and waiting for the young and handsome Philadelphian to join her.

For full two hours she sat there, and still the settlement lay in silence, and no Cecil Burnett came. The sun mounted toward the meridian, and the birds in the leafy coverts behind her sung joyously from the sweet-scented branches their morning carols.

At last, about ten o'clock, she saw a horseman come spurring down over the brow of the hill, and a quick, unaccountable throb in her bosom, together with a glad, half-expectant light in her eyes, apprised her that her new patron was coming.

Why should she manifest such an interest in him? He was a total stranger to her, and nothing more, she told herself; yet a wild yearning inside that swelling bosom belied her words, even as she would have uttered them.

Bah! was she in *love* with the athletic young lawyer?

No! her hands tightened forcibly upon the bridle reins before her, as if to crush back the thought.

So deeply was she engaged, in watching the approaching horseman, that she took no notice of a lithe figure which had stepped out of the grove, until he spoke, in a low, musical voice:

"The Flower of the Plains is wrapt in deep thought, I see. Perhaps an intrusion like mine would be unwelcome, eh?"

The maiden looked around, with a slight cry of surprise:

"Aubrey Lee! you here!" she exclaimed, extending one faultless hand to him, which he clasped in his.

"Yes, my beauty; Aubrey Lee is everywhere. But, I take it, his presence this morning, is an intrusion, eh? Is it not?"

"No, dear friend, you are ever a welcome intruder, to me. I have much to thank you for, sir, and owe you a great debt of gratitude. You have always proved yourself a courteous and generous friend to me, in my hours of trouble, since I was thrown upon the world; and I fear I can never repay you for all."

"Ah! my pretty Rosebud, there is where you mistake. You *can* repay me for every cent's worth I have aided you; and the time is not far off when I shall ask for *pay*—ay, *ma belle*, and I trust you will not refuse to honor my claim. But until then, fare thee well, for I must rejoin Miss Grover, whom I left in the town, back here, a little way."

And the young clerk raised her plump hand fondly to his lips, and imprinted a passionate kiss thereon, just as Cecil Burnett rode into plain view, around a corner of the grove.

Aubrey Lee at once retreated out of sight, among the trees, while our heroine rode forward and greeted Burnett with a bright smile.

If the young lawyer had seen the parting salutation of the beautiful guide's lover, he did not say aught about it, but raised his hat politely, as he spoke.

"I hope I've not detained you, fair lady. I see the sun is nearing the meridian, and I doubt not you were impatient to be off; but, really, I could not get here before, I had a little trouble in procuring the necessary horse and arms."

"Indeed! I did not think of that, or I might have brought you a rifle, along with me. I have an excellent stock of guns and ammunition at my cabin."

"Your cabin? Where is that?" asked Burnett, as they dashed along down the banks of the stream, until the end of the grove was gained, when they struck out across a stretch of undulating prairie.

A half-distrustful light wavering in the maiden's eyes, for a moment, after which she replied:

"If it won't offend you, sir, I'd rather not answer *that* question. My place of abode is a secret to all save two others than myself, and I would prefer it should remain so. 'Tis said that Hurricane Nell lives where Night overtakes her, sir; and *perhaps* it is true."

"Who are these two favored ones?"

"Friends."

"Friends, eh? Well, if I insisted that I am going to be one of your friends, what then?"

"Time, alone, will prove that," she answered, giving him a roguish glance, as together they rode side by side, that made even his schooled heart bound and pulsate, in a manner he could not account for.

About noon they reached the wide level plains, which stretched away mile after mile, one vast expanse of smooth, ocean-like land, covered with low, waving grass, and strikingly beautiful as it lay silent and calm, under the sun, save when an occasional puff of perfumed breeze swept along over the grass-tops and caused them to bend and sway gently, in unison. As far as eye could reach ahead, and on either side of them, nothing but the same extension of plain met their gaze.

"Beautiful!" cried Burnett, in raptures, as at the guide's expressed wish, they presently drew rein. "Grand!"

"Yes; 'tis nature's most sublime creation, in my way of thinking," replied Hurricane Nell, as she scanned the expanse, through a powerful field-glass. "Mr. Burnett, how soon must you reach Cherry Valley?"

"Why as soon as we can, without hurrying ourselves, particularly. Why do you ask?"

"Because; I can see a dark spot off yonder, and am anxious to ride that way, and see what it is, if you have no objections."

"Oh! certainly I have not. Consult your own notions as to that."

Again they spurred on over the waving plain, and some two miles were traversed ere the Girl Guide again spoke.

The black spot had now grown larger, and defined itself into a small motte of trees, which, however, were yet several miles distant.

"Behind that timber," said Hurricane Nell, as she shook her brown hair back from her forehead, "is what the Dacotahs call a *rattle*—or, in other words, it is the spot where wild horses of these regions come for water, a cool spring being just beyond that timber. I once came upon it, in my ridings, but had forgotten its exact location, until I saw it a few moments since."

"Wild horses, eh?"

"Yes; and some of the finest animals you ever laid your eyes upon. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. We will ride a few miles further on, when you must dismount, leave your horse upon the plain, here, and creep on your hands and knees to that motte of timber, as quick as you can."

"What will I do that for?" asked Cecil, dubiously, looking first at his fine broadcloth pants and then at the character of the ground under foot; "I don't understand."

Hurricane Nell laughed merrily.

"Oh! it won't spoil your pantaloons, Mr. Burnett, so don't look so sorrowful. When you get to the grove, creep carefully through it, and if you discover any horses on the other side, immediately draw one of your pistols and discharge it in the air. In the meantime I will ride in a half circle toward the motte and get as near to the northern side as I can. When you discharge the pistol the animals will become frightened and rush toward the north—as they generally do—and I will lead one for you!"

Burnett brightened up considerably at this, and at once entered into the play with spirit.

They galloped on until within a mile of the motte, when they halted, and the lawyer dismounted.

"Be sure and get on the southern side of the horses, if you find any, before you fire," cautioned the girl with a merry laugh, as Cecil sprawled upon his hands and knees, crept away.

Some time was spent by him ere he gained the shadows of the cool, shady motte, and when he at last did reach it, he tarried a moment to rest before proceeding further. Presently he crept softly on, and soon came out upon the other side. Here a strange, wild scene lay before him.

Just in front of him was a little pond of clear, transparent water, in the center of which bubbled up a gushing spring.

All around this pond, lying peacefully down on the luxuriant grass, in the shadows cast by the overhanging trees, were a score of the famed wild horses of the plains. Some were stretched at full length, and others were nibbling at the grass around them.

So quietly had Burnett approached that none of them had been aroused from their noon-day rest. But, even as he thought of this fact, one large, fiery-eyed stallion raised his head aloft, sniffed the air suspiciously, gave a wild snort, and was upon his feet in an instant. Of course this was a given signal for his companions, who also sprung up.

These animals, and more particularly the wild mustangs of Texas and New Mexico, with whom I have come in contact more frequently, are possessed of the most sensitive smelling faculty imaginable. I have known oftentimes a drove of the wary creatures to scent the approach of a person, when the wind was in their favor, at a distance of *three miles*, and give the alarm for a stampede.

As a general thing the mustangs have a sentinel out-posted while they sleep or feed.

Immediately Burnett drew one of his pistols and fired it into mid-air, causing therat a loud report. Then the wild and frightened mass rushed off toward the north with fierce screams, and the Philadelphian stepped out of cover a few paces and watched them. He saw them dash along past the northern end of the motte, then swerve to one side, in a body, as Hurri-

sane Nell dashed out after them in hot pursuit. He saw the lasso whirl high in the air like a flying serpent, and then descend gracefully about the curving neck of a large roan.

At a single word the faithful animal of the Lasso Queen stopped stock still, and the wild horse was jerked upon its haunches.

Then came a series of angry and infuriated screams, and the prisoner reared and plunged and writhed and twisted, but all to no avail.

With the coil of the lasso secured about the saddle-bow, and holding her own steed with a firm hand, Hurricane Nell sat perfectly at ease and watched the struggles with a smile.

Attracted by the fierce screams of their mate, the other mustangs had stopped, and now one or two of the bolder ones came trotting back, squealing viciously, and showing their long teeth.

All this Burnett saw from the motte, and he gave utterance to an admiring yell at the maiden's success.

Then, thrusting his pistol into his belt, he was about to start to join her, when he was seized from behind by a dozen pairs of hands and dragged forcibly back under cover, where he was bound hand and foot!

CHAPTER VI.

THE STRANGE RESCUE.

As soon as Burnett could gain a view of his captors' faces he saw that they were Indians, dressed in full costume and paint for the war-path, and that each wore a brass star attached to their belts in a conspicuous place.

There were twelve of them, all evil and hideous looking brutes, and each was armed with a carbine, knife and pistols.

Dragging their prisoner into the center of the motte, as we have said, they bound him hand and foot, and left him lying on the ground.

"Ugh!" said one, who seemed their ruling spirit—"catch pale-face man much nice. He no fight;—berry gentle, like prairie hen. Serraka is glad. Cap'n Bob, he give Injin heap whisky fur pale-face!"

"So you're one of the outlaw's devils, are you?" was Burnett's scornful question.

"Yes—Cap'n Bob, big chief. Injun much like him. He gib Serraka an' braves whisky—plenty. Ugh!"

"Well, I'll tell you what *I'll* do, now, you greasy imp: If you will set me at liberty I will give you the cigars for the crowd. Do you know what cigars are?"

"Ugh; guess so. Tobacco—long tobaccas; put in mouth, smoke—puff! puff!"

Cecil laughed heartily.

"Yes, that is it. Now will you set me at liberty for six of them?"

"Wagh! let see 'em."

"No; not until you free me."

"Den scalp," grinned the chief.

"All right," replied Cecil, who knew this was only an attempt to make him surrender. "Go ahead."

The red-skins consulted a few seconds, in a low tone.

"Ugh! set white-hen free, for 'bacca," said Serraka, advancing, and cutting the prisoner's bonds.

Burnett was upon his feet in a moment, and his hands sought his belt, but he perceived, to his chagrin, that the wily savages had possessed themselves of his weapons.

"He! he!" grinned Serraka, cunningly, "no got shoot-guns. Me got um," and he glanced approvingly toward his belt. "Serraka see heap ways ahead, like buffalo; know White Hen be a squaw. Too sharp for 'im. *Hee! Hee!* Serraka big smart Injin!"

"Ye-s! I should say you was," replied Cecil, reflectively. "Howsomever, here are your cigars."

And he took a package of fragrant Havanas from a pocket, and handed them to the red-skin, who uttered a grunt of approval, and selecting one for his own use, he divided the remainder among his chuckling companions.

Burnett watched them amusedly, as they lit

the weeds, and puffed away in great satisfaction. They reminded him, as they strutted about, of victorious roosters after the termination of some valiant deed, when in the height of their glory.

After a moment he turned and was about to leave the grove, when, to his surprise, he was again seized, and ere he could offer resistance, was bound hand and foot, as before.

"Wagh!" grinned the worthy Serraka, blowing a cloud of cigar-smoke into Burnett's face; "Serraka much smart Injin. Got smoke-bacca an' pale-face, now, too. No promise not catch *White Hen* 'g'in, he! he!"

The young lawyer uttered something suspiciously like a curse.

"What are you going to do with me?" he growled, in disgust; "where take me?"

"Nowhere, jes' now," said the chief, puffing away, contentedly. "Me catch Big Hurricane, when she come look for *White Hen*. Ughi den take two prisoners to big cabin."

Burnett rolled over, and groaned.

Presently two of the savages were dispatched to the edge of the motte, to watch, while the rest lay upon the ground, and finished their cigars.

An hour passed away.

Some peculiar influence of the silence and peaceful quiet of the cool motte caused Cecil to drop asleep, and he slumbered soundly for several hours.

When he awoke it was with a violent start, and he attempted to spring to his feet, but still found that he was bound.

All of the savages, but one, were away, watching on the edge of the forest. This one stood as sentinel but a short distance away.

It was rapidly growing dark, in the depths of the timber, and presently the savage set about gathering a heap of leaves and twigs, which, in the course of ten minutes, were ignited, and blazed up brightly, illuminating the scene around for a considerable distance.

Then the red-skin seated himself upon a log, under an immense tree, and lit his pipe, at which he puffed silently.

The hours wore on leaden wings, it seemed to Cecil, as he lay in a cramped position on the ground.

About nine o'clock, as near as he could judge, Serraka came to the fire, and glanced at the prisoner and said:

"No catch *White Hurricane* yet. Cotch her fore mornin', dough. She leab horses out on plain. Creep like snake to grove. Injins watch like hawk. Cotch her soon."

And after having taken a turn or two around the fire, he once more vanished in the impenetrable gloom beyond the camp-fire.

An hour more dragged by.

"See here, red-skin," at last cried Cecil, unable longer to lie in such an aggravating position, "cut these cords around my feet, so that I can exercise my limbs a little, and I'll promise you I won't attempt to escape."

"Ugh! *White Hen* got more smoke-bacca!" asked the savage, reflectively.

"Yes; there is another cigar here, in my vest pocket. Free my feet, and you can have it."

Long Snout rose with alacrity, and in a moment more Burnett was able to stand upon his feet, while the Indian rejoiced in the possession of another Havana.

After exercising his cramped limbs for some time, Cecil once more seated himself before the camp-fire.

Hours flew on; the fire died down to a bed of red coals. Burnett knew by this that the sentinel was asleep.

Still he made no attempt to escape, for he felt sure such a move would be hazardous, with so many of the red heathens lying all around the edges of the motte.

He was considering what to do, when a strange sound attracted his attention. It came from the dark leafy covers among the branches of the tree, at the foot of which slept *Long Snout*.

With eager eyes Cecil watched, and strained his ear to catch any other sound that might be made.

The lower branches of the tree were only about three feet above *Long Snout*'s head, and were so large that only a heavy weight, or shock, could jar them.

Presently a pebble dropped through the leaves, and fell at the sentinel's feet. But he did not awake.

The next instant a body swung down into mid-air, head foremost, the feet and legs being locked about the limb above, and the head and shoulders were brought on a level with those of the Indian.

In a second the plump, muscular arms were straightened down, one hand clutched the sleeping *Long Snout* by the throat, and the other, which contained a long knife, drove the glittering blade repeatedly to the hilt in the bared breast. The redskin writhed and twisted fiercely, but could not break away, or even yell, for the grip about his windpipe was like a twisted cord. He sunk down, quietly, the blood spurting from every gash in streams. Quickly the assailant returned his knife to his belt, and drew an iron-stamp from an inner pocket, shaped like a half-moon, which, after dipping into the life-blood of *Long Snout*, was brought forcibly down upon the forehead, leaving a bloody impression—a *gory half-moon*.

In an instant more the strange avenger had disappeared up among the branches, silently, like a thing of shadow.

Cecil Burnett uttered a startled ejaculation, as he saw the hitherto concealed face, upon the drawing up of the body. It was not a man, as he had at first supposed, but *Hurricane Nell!* Rising quickly, he advanced to the side of the stricken savage.

Every spark of life had left the red-skin's body, and the ghastly *death-mark* was startlingly distinct as the dim glow of the fast expiring embers fell upon the distorted visage.

"Heavens!" muttered the young lawyer, with a shudder, "what a sickening sight. It is as the tavern-keeper said. This wild creature, whom they call *Hurricane Nell*, is a very tiger in her hates!"

He peered up among the dark branches of the tree, but could see nothing; not the stir of a leaf or twig announced that a human being was concealed in the dark depths.

"Humph!" muttered Cecil, again staring down at the savage, "can it be she did not see me, and thinks I have escaped?"

Even as he spoke he felt something drop over his shoulders and then tighten about his waist. 'Twas a lasso. The next moment he began to rise, and was pulled rapidly up among the branches.

CHAPTER VII.

AT LUKE RICE'S—A RACE.

At first, Burnett scarcely knew what to make of it, but in a few moments found himself sitting on an upper branch of the tree, and *Hurricane Nell* facing him.

"Sh—" she motioned, as he was about to speak aloud—"sh! There are Indians all around us. Follow me, carefully, without the least noise. Don't make a misstep, for if you should fall to the ground now it would be all up with you!"

Removing the lasso from about his waist, and severing the cord which confined his arms, she crept out on limb, at the eastern side of the tree, where the limbs of the next tree were interwoven with those of its giant neighbor, thus forming a natural sort of bridge in mid-air. Across into the next, and the next, they thus crept on, and then the daring girl stopped, and listened attentively.

Not a sound save the chirp of a cricket greeted her. The savages had not yet discovered their escape, but might do so at any instant.

"Here," said the girl, once more fastening the lasso about Cecil's waist, "I'll lower you to the ground, where you will wait for me."

He obeyed, mechanically, for he was wholly at loss how to act in the darkness of a wilderness, where foes were hovering on either side.

of him. Had he been at home, in the court of justice, and been confronted with the scowls of twice as many civilized rascals, he would not have felt at all alarmed. The trained arms of his beautiful and eccentric companion lowered him safely to the ground. A few moments after she glided like a squirrel down the trunk of the tree. Now listening again, and hearing no suspicious sounds, with the stealth of a panther she led the way toward the northern end of the motte.

When within fifty yards of the edge, she bade Cecil remain behind, in the shadows, while she crept further on to reconnoiter.

Fully half an hour passed, and the lawyer was growing impatient, when, suddenly, she rejoined him.

"Come!" she said, with a low laugh, "I've cleared the path."

They hurried swiftly, noiselessly on, and soon emerged upon the edge of the woodland, and stopped.

Cecil gave a low cry as he saw two savages leaning up against a tree, as if engaged in a close conversation, not ten feet from where they had halted.

"Quick!" he gasped, grasping Hurricane Nell by the arm. "There are Indians! This way!"

The border beauty uttered a low, chuckling laugh, and drew back.

"They won't hurt you," she replied.

"Why—see! They're in plain view!"

"So I perceive. But they are harmless fellows, just at present, and not addicted to raising ha'ra! I reasoned with them, a short time ago, and they concluded not to take up arms against us."

"What do you mean? You don't mean to tell me that they are—?"

"Yes, I do—dead as smoked herrings!"

"And you killed them?"

"I had that honor."

Cecil Burnett shuddered.

"I am inclined," he said, peering forward at the corpses that stood up so naturally, "to believe that you are a trifle bloodthirsty."

"Hem! yes: I'm sometimes of the same opinion, Mr. Burnett. But it is a thirst I cannot quench, sir. When you know that I have sworn a fearful oath to avenge the burning of my parents' dead bodies, and that yet half of the two score of ruffians still roam in freedom, you will not wonder at my unhesitancy in taking the life of a member of Cap'n Bob Woolf's accursed band. Come!"

Without another word she threw herself flat upon the ground, and crept out over the dusky plain, the young lawyer following her example. In five moments they had reached the spot where the horses were lying, in a natural indenture of the plain, the tall grass hitherto concealing them from view.

To Cecil's surprise and wonder, he saw that the big roan, whom Nell had lassoed, was lying contentedly by the side of the other animals.

"Humph!" he muttered. "This is the strangest of all!"

"Think so?" queried the maiden, with a flush of pride. "Well, he is to be yours! But come! let's mount and be off as quickly as possible!"

Quickly they were in the saddles, and then Hurricane Nell led the way rapidly off toward the southeast, through the spectral gloom of the approaching morn. The roan stallion galloped along on one side of her and Cecil on the other.

The night was very clear and still, and the clink of the horses' hoofs soon reached the ears of the Dakotahs in the motte, who at once set up a vindictive howl and whoop of rage.

But, ere they could reach and mount their own mustangs, which had been tethered in the southern portion of the motte, the Hurricane and Cecil were far, far away toward the distant Cherry Valley.

On they sped over the wide, level plain at the rate of eight miles an hour, for their horses were refreshed, and could stand the long gallop at such a speed.

Morning presently dawned, bright and glorious, and then, as the hazy sun rose up over the crest of the horizon, almost in front of them, the maiden announced that they had only about fifteen miles yet to ride.

About nine o'clock they came to a stretch of undulating prairie, and in another hour struck into a narrow, yet fertile valley, which ran back for five miles between a range of hills.

Several cabins were passed, from the windows of which several blear-eyed, bloated wretches peered out.

"Keep your shooting-iron in readiness!" said Hurricane Nell in a low tone, "for all of these cabins we are passing are *robber dens*. Yonder big ranch is the general rendezvous of the worst of Cap'n Bob's ruffians!"

Cecil grasped his rifle, which was now his only weapon, with a firm hand, and they dashed on up the valley. Fortunately no one offered to molest them, and in half an hour they rounded an abrupt turn in the valley, and came into view of a single cabin by the roadside.

Here the girl drew rein and said: "There is where Luke Rice lives. I will remain outside here while you transact your business with him. How long will it take you? It is better that we should get out of Cherry Valley ere darkness sets in, or we may have trouble!"

"I can rejoin you inside of an hour," replied Cecil, dismounting and going to the cabin.

Here, after rapping several times, he was admitted by an old, scar-cheeked, dwarfish-looking man, who nodded pleasantly to the heroine guide as he saw her.

After Cecil had disappeared she unbridled the animals, and allowed them to graze along over the knolls; then she sat down on a boulder and petted the big roan, who approached her fearlessly and allowed her to stroke his immense mane and rub her soft hand up and down his nose.

Instead of one hour, three of them dragged by ere Cecil Burnett emerged from the borderer's cabin and rejoined Nell. There were tears in his eyes as he prepared to mount, which Nell could not account for, and thenceforth concluded that some mystery connected the two men. Ere they were ready to start, old Luke Rice came out to the trail, carrying a salverful of the most savory venison, already cooked, which he urged upon the guide.

"Take it!" he said, with a grin. "I opine ye kin chaw grizzly, or buffaler, or deer meat yet, less ye've lost yer teeth since I seed ye last."

She accepted it, and both being hungry, she and Cecil devoured it on the spot.

"An' ye, younker," said Rice, addressing the young lawyer: "ef I conclude ter let ye know afore my oath expires, "I'll send ye a lettir, sir. I don't reckon's ye'll hear from me, tho', till arter the 8th uv August. I 'hain't ther most lenient cuss ye kin dream uv in these ere leetle fusses! W'en I do write ye, tho', I'll guv ye ther hull ijee, from J ter Jezebel, see 'f I don't! Now, good-by to ye."

"Good-day, sir," replied Burnett, coldly, as they rode away.

"Will you stay in Dwight's long, now?" Hurricane Nell asked, half-dreamingly, as they galloped on.

Burnett gave her a quick glance, and a wild throb in his heart made him flush a trifle; for there was something in the tone of the question which seemed to express regret.

"I shall be compelled to stay in the West until the 8th of August, if not longer," he replied, slowly. "Probably at Dwight's, if it don't get too hot for me there. Would you care, Miss Nellie, if I were to leave at once?"

The question came so suddenly, and was so earnest, that she, in turn, was startled, and a deep blush stole over her beautiful face.

"I don't see that I have given you occasion to ask so pointed a question, sir," she replied, half haughtily, turning her head away to conceal the tell-tale expression in her hazel eyes. "My answer would be, that of course I'd care as a friend to see you depart. That is all."

All! A heavy weight suddenly seemed to

settle upon Cecil's heart, and he did not broach the subject again, for many hours.

On, they galloped, and as they dashed by the cabins of the border outlaws, the eyes of the girl scout scanned each one, like those of a lynx, and she whispered to Burnett, eagerly:

"See! the trampled ground about here? And there are no faces at the cabin windows?"

"Well, what of that?" asked her companion.

"Very much. Cap'n Bob has secretly followed us from Dwight's, and while we were at Luke's has been here, ordered out his men, and they've gone on ahead to ambush us."

Here she extended Cecil her holster pistols, and then they sped on, accompanied closely by the big roan. Soon they came to a gully or intersecting valley, and into this the guide wheeled the animals.

"We will cut across," she explained, in answer to Cecil's inquiring look, "and reach the plains by a shorter route."

In ten moments they skurried out across a rolling prairie, and on glancing to the east, they saw a score of mounted horsemen bearing down toward them.

Cap'n Bob and his ruffians.

"Now for it!" exclaimed Hurricane Nell, putting the spurs to her horse. "Follow, close, Mr. Burnett. It is going to be a race for life."

He obeyed, with alacrity, and from that instant the wild and exciting race commenced.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEAD SHOT—CECIL'S PRESENT.

ON—on they dashed, out across the undulating prairie—on, out upon the level plain, where they were in plain view of the pursuers.

Captain Bob and his gang were about a mile in the rear, and were urging their long-winded mustangs down to their level-best speed.

Hurricane Nell took the lead, for her clean-flimed horse was the fastest of the three, and Cecil and the big roan kept close behind her.

She well knew that the ruffians must triumph in the long run, as their animals were fresh, and possessed of great endurance. Therefore, she resolved to hold out as long as possible, and then, if it came to the worst—fight!

She examined her superbly-mounted rifle, and saw that a fresh cartridge was in its place, as they dashed on, Cecil doing likewise. On—like the veritable hurricane they swept, the animals panting, from their tremendous exertions, the yells of the outlaws growing more distinct each moment.

On—on—on, and mile after mile was traversed—wildly, swiftly.

Ahead and on either side, not a tree, brush, or shrub offered the fugitives protection.

Naught but a vast expanse of glowing plain stretched on and off for twenty miles.

Their horses were already beginning to show signs of exhaustion, more particularly Cecil's, who was not accustomed to long races upon the level plain.

Nearer—steadily nearer came the pursuers, until at last they were within long-range rifle-shot, and their triumphant yells proclaimed their expected victory. Still they did not offer to fire, and it became evident that their purpose was to capture the two fugitives.

Cap'n Bob was ahead, and a horrible, triumphant leer dwelt upon his bloated countenance, as he came on.

On—on—on, and Hurricane Nell perceived that Cecil's beast was failing rapidly, while her own was still in the lead, and the big roan galloping easily at her right. The wild stallion did not show a sign of fatigue.

A sudden resolute light entered the desperate girl's eyes.

"Lash your animal up to my left side, here!" she suddenly cried, to the young lawyer, who was pale and silent.

He obeyed, mechanically, and for a second all three animals dashed on, abreast.

"Seize your rifle, and when I lift you, spring from your stirrups," she next commanded,

bracing herself firmly in the saddle. In another instant, she had seized him about the waist, raised him high over her head by the power of her wonderful arms, and deposited him upon the back of the wild stallion!

A wild, unearthly yell of applause went up from the stentorian throats of the pursuers. Ruffians and cut-throats though they were, they could not but admire and cheer the accomplisher of this astounding act, and Cap'n Bob Woolf was among the loudest who shouted the "bravo!"

Burnett, at any other time, would have flushed with shame, at thus being so handled by a young woman, but now he could but give her a grateful glance, for he was forced to cling tenaciously to the stallion's mane, as the beast darted away like a streak of lightning.

Nell's horse, too, now seemed to have won new strength, for it dashed forward viciously, keeping alongside the stallion, while the third animal brought up the rear.

Still the outlaws pressed on. They were as eager and as determined as ever. Not sixty yards now intervened between the pursued and the pursuer.

"Ye may's well s'render!" shouted Cap'n Bob, with a wild laugh, "fur we're sure ter overhaul ye, sooner or later!"

"Catch your game, before you brag over it, Bob Woolf!" retorted Hurricane Nell, sharply. "When I surrender to you, look out for the world to come to an end!"

On—on—and still the ruffians gained, inch by inch, and foot by foot. They were sure to win, unless something like a miracle happened in the fugitives' favor.

At last Hurricane Nell took up her rifle, a wild fire in her eyes, and turned her face toward the outlaws.

"You'd better keep back, Bob Woolf, if you don't want to taste cold lead. Enough of a race is enough. Too much, I won't stand," she cried.

"Blaze away, gal, ef ye wanter!" replied the ruffian, flinging himself, Indian fashion, upon the animal's side, his gang at once following suit. "Ye kent do much damage, now, I judge."

Even as he spoke, though the border beauty brought her rifle to her shoulder, there was a bright flash, a wild, piteous shriek, and Cap'n Bob's horse dropped in its tracks—dead! The bullet had pierced the brain. As a matter of course, the border chief being close hugged against the poor beast's left side, and the animal falling on that same side, Cap'n Bob was at once hopelessly imprisoned, aside from being nearly crushed, by the weight upon him.

"Help! help!" he shrieked, in an agonized voice—"help!"

In an instant his followers had surrounded him, and dismounted, to roll off the dead body. As they did so, Hurricane Nell suddenly wheeled her own horse abruptly about, and spurred him fiercely back, right amongst the animals of the outlaws, at the same time discharging rapidly, all the chambers of her revolvers into their midst!

With wild, frightened screams, they rushed off over the plains. It had been the daring girl's plan to effect this stampede, and she had succeeded, admirably, and ere the astounded outlaws could recover their scattered senses, their girl foe was speeding away in the direction taken by young Burnett, firing as she went.

Once, twice, and thrice she brought her little rifle up to her shoulder, and each time there was a flash, a sharp crack, and a dead shot brought its victim to the earth.

Ere the discomfited ruffians could repossess themselves of their horses, Hurricane Nell and Cecil were miles away.

Seeing that further pursuit was useless, the bruised Captain Bob declared their defeat, and an hour later, after burying the three dead outlaws, the main band set off back toward the rendezvous, while the chief turned his horse's head in the direction of Dwight's.

Nell and Burnett journeyed by slow stages toward the mining settlement, which they reached late on the following day.

Just above Hon. Felix Grover's mansion Hurricane Nell drew rein.

"I guess I won't go any further with you, Mr. Burnett," she said, in answer to his inquiring glance. "There are ruffians up there at the tavern, constantly on the watch, who would not hesitate to shoot me, at sight."

"Very well," he answered, taking out his wallet, "then I will pay you now. How much are your charges, for the trip?"

"I generally charge ten dollars, sir, but—but—I'll say five to you!"

"You are cheap," Cecil answered, with just a touch of sarcasm. "Here, dear lady, is what I deem a just remuneration for your services;" and he forthwith laid two crisp fifty-dollar notes into her hands.

"Oh! sir, I cannot accept of so much, indeed!" cried the beautiful girl, endeavoring to force the bills back upon him. "You are too generous. That is more money than the best of guides get, for longer trips."

"No matter," he said, with a smile, restoring his wallet to an inner pocket. "You are the best, I'll wager, that there is in the territory. Keep them, lady, then, as a gift of friendship, from me."

"I shall never forget your kindness, sir," replied she, turning her head aside, to conceal the involuntary tears that sprung into her hazel eyes. "I am not used to gifts. My whole life, especially of late years, has been among those who were my enemies—among those who neither tendered me a gift of remembrance, or even a kind word."

"Then you have no friends?"

"None—save yourself, Luke Rice, and one other."

"And that other—?"

"Is a kind gentleman, who once rescued me from the outlaws. Since that, he has proven himself my friend in several ways."

"He is the one I saw at the edge of the grove, several mornings ago, ere we started on this trip?"

"The same."

A cloud overspread Cecil's brow.

"Will you not tell me where you reside, Miss Nellie," he asked, tenderly taking her hand, and raising it to his lips, as he had seen that other fellow do, "so that I can come and see you?"

"No!" she replied, hurriedly, half-yearningly, as she disengaged her hand. "You should not kiss my hand, Mr. Burnett. It is an ungentlemanly act; beside, that hand is stained with blood!"

And without another word, she wheeled her horse, abruptly, and spurred away.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN WOODCHUCK.

WEEKS passed away.

Cecil Burnett still lingered at Dwight's. The greater share of his time he spent in roaming over the surrounding country, either on the back of the big roan, whom he had christened Hurricane, after our heroine, or on foot, always accompanied by a new rifle which he had recently purchased, and otherwise well armed with revolvers and knife.

Cap'n Bob had returned to the settlement, but, strange to say, he neither molested or noticed the young lawyer, who was also careful not to again excite his enmity.

The tide of emigration to Dwight's was constantly increasing, for the rich claims were yielding immense quantities of dust, quartz and nuggets to the miners.

Jonas was reaping a bountiful harvest out of his tavern, and was consequently a most joyous personage of importance.

Two weeks had now gone by since the Philadelphian had returned from his journey to the cabin in Cherry Valley, and it was the first of July.

Since his strange parting with Hurricane Nell he had neither seen or heard aught of her. He had inquired and searched repeatedly for

her place of abode, but no one knew where it was, and he failed to discover it.

One day he came face to face with Aubrey Lee, the man whom he remembered of seeing once upon the grove's edge, and whom the guide had said was her friend.

"Do you know where Hurricane Nell lives?" Cecil asked, abruptly.

Lee stared at him curiously a moment, then dropped his eyes.

"No!" he replied. "I never heard of such a person!"

"You lie!" cried the lawyer, impetuously. "I saw you kiss her hand once upon the edge of yonder grove in the valley!"

"Curse you! I'll pummel you for that!" hissed the clerk, dealing Burnett a stinging blow upon the cheek. "I'll learn you who to call a liar!"

"You are a liar!" retorted Cecil, springing upon him like a tiger, whereupon they clinched.

Fights and knock-downs at Dwight's were common attractions, but the announcement that the *Bruiser*, as Cecil was called, and Aubrey Lee were at it, soon brought a swarm of loafers and miners to the spot.

A pair of men never fought with more earnestness than did Cecil and the clerk.

Over and over they rolled, looked in a deadly embrace, and puffing and panting like porpoises. At last, by a mighty effort, the Philadelphian wrenched himself from Lee's embrace and sprung to his feet, blood streaming from a vicious bite in his neck.

"Fight it out with knives!" yelled the surging crowd.

"No!" shouted Burnett, "I'm satisfied with my fists."

"Coward!" hooted a voice in the background.

"I'll make you an example as soon as I'm done with this puppy," calmly answered the young athlete as he turned to meet Lee, who had also gained his feet, and was rushing upon him with a dagger in his clutch.

With a cool, but powerful and precise blow of his left arm, Cecil parried the thrust of his assailant, and then with his right gave him a knuckle-winder* between the eyes that would have felled an ox. Aubrey Lee went down in a quivering heap.

"Now!" cried Burnett, turning and coolly scanning the collection of rough and grizzly faces around him, "where is the loafer who dares to cry coward. I am ready to accommodate him!"

"An' here he is!" shouted a burly ruffian, making his way boldly through the crowd.

It was Cap'n Bob Woolf!

"Very well, sir!" replied Cecil without a show of trepidation, "I would just as soon whip you as any other man in the crowd—and a little rather. Remember, however, you are to use no weapons but your knuckles. I am averse to using steel or lead!"

"Ha! ha! hear 'im squeal, boyees! He dassent pull a bowie!" laughed Woolf, nodding significantly to his men, a number of whom were in the crowd. "He's a chicken-hearted *funkey!*"

"Retract your words, curse you!" hissed Burnett, stepping close up in his insulter's front.

"I won't!" grinned the outlaw, leering up into his enemy's face.

But it was a sorry leer for him!

The next instant, and as quick as the lightning flash, the fist of the trained boxer was thrust heavily against his eye and forehead.

For the second time within the month the border captain fell senseless to the earth from the blow of the young lawyer.

In an instant there was an angry cry among the followers of Cap'n Bob, and a dozen of them sprung fiercely toward Cecil.

"Back!" he yelled, drawing a revolver in each hand, and firing into the ruffians' midst—"If you would not die, keep back!"

"Ay! by ther overlakin' Pellerkins o' ther Percific, keep back! By ther North Amery-

*A miner's phrase for a blow.

kan Polekat, git back! Whoop! hoo! fur Je-rushy! That's it, boyee! Fist 'em in their congenyal pherseeks, like Salmon did Garmarrels! Lay onter 'em as Joner did ter ther Big Trout! Pellerkans o' ther Percific! kum on ye dirty skunks, an' let me mangle ye!"

The personage who gave utterance to this singular tirade was a tall, raw-boned man, clad in buckskin from top to toe, with the exception of a mask, which completely hid his face, and which was made from the untanned hide of the woodchuck. He had suddenly made his appearance at Burnett's side with the above remarks, but from whence he came no one knew.

Deadly were the shots that his pistols fired among the now infuriated outlaws.

Under the bright noonday's sun, a fearful, tragic scene was enacted, that day, at Dwight's.

Doubly incensed, as they saw their comrades fall, the ruffian gang, many of whom had not hitherto been considered under Cap'n Bob's rule, now showed their true colors, and plunged into the thickest of the battle. A score of miners sprung to the side of the Philadelphian and his strange friend, and fought with a will.

The crack of pistol-shots rung out on every side; wild yells, dying groans, the clash and clash of knives, and awful curses all helped to make up one of the most terrible and exciting affrays that ever went to make Dwight's a notorious name. Bullets whizzed, men fell, blood spurted from gaping wounds, and yet the infuriated contestants fought on.

Soon, however, it became apparent that the outlaws greatly outnumbered their enemy—a fact which did not escape the practiced eye of him of the woodchuck mask.

"North Amerykhan Pole-kats, an' Percific Pellerkans!" he roared, clubbing his pistols, and knocking back the ruffians; "thes'll never do. I'll settle these 're leetle hash, 'bout as lively as ever ern eel squarmed outen er gridle-pan!"

Taking advantage of a second's full, he carried to his lips a tin horn, resembling a bugle, which was secured to his belt by a cord, and blew a loud, shrill blast, the sound of which echoed over hill and dale.

"Thet'll fetch 'em, sure's my name ar' Cap. Woodchuck!" he muttered, dropping the instrument to his side, and dealing an outlaw a heavy kick in the jaws. "All's fa'r in luv, corn-juice, an' war; tharfore fight wile ye kin fight, an' drink corn-juice when ye kent do nuthin' else. Them's my logickal sentymnts o' et!"

The eccentric fellow was bleeding from a half-score of wounds, but he scarcely seemed to notice the fact, and sailed into the wildest of the battle without the least hesitation.

Cecil, however, was getting faint and pale, from a terrible loss of blood. His wounds were numerous, but fortunately, only flesh gashes, and confined chiefly to his body.

Now the outlaws came on with renewed ferocity, desperately determined to clean out their antagonists and end the struggle.

Suddenly, there were several shrill warwhoops, the pattering of many feet, and two score of armed Pawnee Indians came rushing upon the scene.

The ruffians quickly saw their approach, and giving the alarm, at once skedaddled, at the top of their speed, leaving their wounded and dead where they had fallen.

"Whoop!" yelled Cap. Woodchuck, waving his skin turban, victoriously in the air. "Percific Pellerkans, and North Amerykhan Pole-kats! Hyar kums my fellers. Know'd they weren't out o' heerin' o' Gabriel'a trumpet. Hello, Grinning Moon, kim along hyar, an I'll b'y ye ther whiskey. Powerful glad ye cum, jes' in ther nick o' time. We'd've, bin korpses if ye hadn't."

The dead bodies were overhauled—sixteen in all—but Cap'n Bob's and Aubrey Lee's were not among them. Fortunately, only four on Cecil's side had perished.

A hard fought victory, it seemed, to him.

CHAPTER X.

THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT.

We must now return upon the due course of our narrative to witness a scene which occurred at the mansion of Felix Grover, between the old gentleman and Aubrey Lee, on the morning of the day previous to the affray at Dwight's.

The morning was a lovely one, with clear, blue sky, a smiling, hazy-red sun, and balmy breezes. Mr. Grover, supported on the arm of his beautiful daughter, had succeeded in driving away the troublesome gout enough to walk about beneath the cover of the perfume-laden grove.

Lotta Grover, attired in a cool, white wrapper, looped gracefully up with rosettes of pink and blue, looked very fair and beautiful. As they walked under the shady archways, and silently drank of the sweet morning air, and listened to the songs of the birds, among the leafy branches, both seemed supremely happy.

"Lotta, my dear," said the happy speculator, at last, breaking the delicious spell, "I have come out here, with you, this early in the morn, simply to get away from your mother's hearing, and, too, I wish to ask you a question."

"Well, papa?" asked the girl.

"Has Aubrey Lee, my clerk, asked you to become his wife?"

A soft blush mantled the young lady's features.

"Yes, dear papa," she answered, dropping her lustrous eyes to the ground.

"And what did you say? Was it yes, my girl?"

"Yes, papa. Aubrey loves me, and I love him; so, you see, he, and only he, can ever make me happy. Was I right?"

"Hum! yes—I suppose so," replied Mr. Grover, thoughtfully. "But, mind, now, don't you dare to marry him until you first tell me. D'y'e hear?"

"Yes, papa."

"Then heed!" snapped he, surlily. "Now, you stay here, and enjoy yourself. I'm going back to the house."

And disengaging himself, he limped away, not deigning her assistance, as lame as he was.

Scarcely had he disappeared in the direction of the mansion, when a cloaked and veiled female emerged from a clump of bushes near by, and confronted the young woman.

Lotta started back, with a low scream.

"Oh! you needn't shriek," exclaimed the stranger, with a wild laugh. "I'm no bugbear. I'll not hurt you."

"What would you have, here?" demanded the heiress, haughtily, stepping aside.

"I would warn you!" hissed she, in a passionate voice. "I would warn you, Lotta Grover! Beware how you teach your heart to cherish a serpent!"

"What do you mean? Whom do you call a serpent?"

"Aubrey Lee—as you know him! He would wreck your life, fair maiden, as he has mine. Nay, do not start, or tremble, for I speak the truth. I am Aubrey Lee's wife!"

"His wife, woman? Impossible!"

"Nol! 'Tis true—too true, God knows! He wedded me in St. Joseph, only a short year ago. After a month of married bliss he deserted me, and fled to parts unknown. I was left poor and friendless upon the world. I swore and registered an awful oath before my God, however, to hunt him down, were he even at the remotest corner of the earth. So I set out."

"Fortune favored me. I came to the mining settlement, up there, by accident, and found him, under the assumed name of Lee. I did not apprise him of my presence, but set to work and found that he was the confidential clerk of your father, Honorable Felix Grover, and that he was likely to become your husband."

"By merest chance, just now, I overheard your conversation with your father, and your acknowledgment that you were engaged to my villainous husband. Oh! fair lady, heed

my warning, and cast this man away—from your heart!"

"Ahem! yes; cast an honorable man aside at an adventuress' dictation!" sneered Miss Grover, coldly. "What sublime impudence, to be sure!"

"I am no adventuress, and I loathe and despise him, although he is my husband; but, Heaven be my witness, he shall not be so long. The Creole blood in my veins is full of fire, and Aubrey Lee shall feel my avenging hand. Again, Lotta Grover, I warn you to cast the sting of the serpent from thy bosom!"

"I shall consult my own wishes as to that, madam. Your story is highly improbable; I do not believe one word of it. Maybe you can show me a marriage certificate?"

"Alas! no—not now. I have one, but it's in my sachet at the tavern, yonder."

"Then, step aside, please, and allow me to pass. I will hear no more."

"Nay! hold, dear young woman," and the veiled woman clutched Miss Grover by the arm; "hear me out. You must believe me and must not wed Aubrey Lee. I will appeal to your old father, and if he will not aid me in bringing this man to justice, ere the villain shall do dishonor to one so fair and lovely as you, I'll kill him. Now go, but heed my words!"

And turning, the strange woman disappeared in the depths of the grove, while Miss Lotta hastened indignant and frightened toward her father's mansion.

About ten minutes previous to the foregoing conversation, Aubrey Lee rode up to the mansion, and on inquiring for the "Governor," was told that he and Lotta had gone for a walk in the grove.

So dismounting, he waited in the elegant library for the old gentleman's return.

In the course of fifteen moments more footsteps were heard, and the "Governor" staggered in, and sunk heavily upon the cushions of his arm-chair.

His walk had proven almost too much for him.

"Well!" he demanded, sharply, as his eyes rested upon the clerk.

"Well," replied Lee, dropping his eyes upon the soft crimson carpets.

"What d'y'e want from the 'Governor'?"

"I came to foreclose this mortgage, and take possession of the property, here, if you cannot repay me the sum of thirty thousand dollars, which I gave to the miners, a week ago, to satisfy their demands. You will remember that by agreement I can foreclose the mortgage at any time, within a month after drawing, providing you cannot honor all my claims?"

"Exactly, sir," replied Mr. Grover; "I remember all. I am, though, contrary to your expectations, ready and willing to return you the money you so kindly lent me, Aubrey Lee. You gave the miners, through an old boss named Kenser, six hundred fifty-dollar notes, or in other words, thirty thousand dollars, eh? Is this not so?"

"It is correct, sir."

"Well, Aubrey Lee, John Kenser has brought them back to me. Every one of them are counterfeits!"

The clerk leaped from his seat with a terrible oath.

"What?" he cried, white with rage, at the discovery of his attempt to pass such money counterfeits!"

"Yes, sir," replied "Governor" Grover, coolly. "Every one of them. Clever ones, too, and all executed on one bank. Here they are;" and he took up a large package, wrapped in brown paper, which was lying on a stand near by. "Give me back the mortgage, and you can have your own money."

A terrible look flared across the clerk's face—a horrible leer.

"I won't," he hissed, savagely. "Curse you; you've found me out, eh?"

With another anathema, he made a violent spring upon the old man, grasped him by the throat, and bore him noiselessly to the floor.

Snatching a cushion from a chair, he held it fiercely over the victim's face, so that he could not breathe.

In five minutes he rose to his feet, with a satisfied chuckle. The "Governor" lay white and lifeless upon the carpet—*smothered*.

After replacing the cushion in its chair, the clerk secreted the package of counterfeit notes behind a tall book-case, and then, kneeling down beside the prostrate form, called loudly for help.

In an instant there came the sound of hurrying footsteps, and Mrs. Grover, followed by a half-breed servant, burst into the room.

"What is the matter?" she gasped, glancing down at the silent figure, then bursting into tears and sobs.

"Quick! bring some water!" ordered the villain. "Governor Grover fell from his chair while we were engaged in conversation, and has only fainted, I guess. His morning walk was too much for him. Don't be frightened, dear Mrs. Grover; you will soon see your husband once more himself!"

Water was brought and liberally dashed into the white face of the speculator.

But to no avail.

Life could not be restored to the clay where life was not.

Governor Grover was dead!

Miss Lotta soon returned from her walk, and she and her mother wept in silence over the good father and husband.

Lingering a short time to offer consolation to the grief-stricken wife and daughter, Aubrey Lee promised to call the next day, and then took his departure from the mansion.

Mounting his horse he rode swiftly away toward the settlement.

CHAPTER XI.

FOURTH O' JULY AT DWIGHT'S.

THE lucky termination, for Cecil Burnett, of the battle at Dwight's that day, was only one of the topics of conversation in the evening at the tavern. The news of "Governor" Grover's sudden death had reached the settlement, and was also a theme for discussion among a class.

Cap'n Bob and his half score of men returned about dark, and took up their quarters in the gambling saloon, but were careful not to let fall any hostile word or action, for Cap Woodchuck and his right bower, Grinning Moon, had engaged board for a short time of the worthy Jonas; and, too, their band of swarthy Pawnees were not far away, encamped on the crest of a neighboring knoll.

Cecil came down into the bar-room after supper, looking pretty well battered up and feeling uncomfortably sore and stiff from his numerous wounds.

"Hello!" cried Cap Woodchuck as he made his appearance; "hyar kums ther North American Buster; skin me fur a buffaler ef he aint. Hey, thar, Buster, guv's yer paw! I want ter examine them knuckles o' yern. By ther Polekat, ye did fearful work w' 'em!"

The young Philadelphian shook the ranger's hand, heartily.

"No. I only did my share," he replied, modestly. "I feel a little sore and stiff, though, after the scrimmage."

"Oh! wait till ye git usle ter sich life, an' ye won't mind a few slashes a day," laughed Cap. Woodchuck. "In fact, ye'll grow ter like em, sir. Why, Perciflic Pellerkans an' Goat Gruel, boyee, I like nuthin' better nor ter git three er four jabs o' er knife every twenty-four hours. Et keeps er feller frum superfluous blood, an' makes 'im feel like'r North Amerykan Polekat."

And to all appearances, the iron-framed speaker believéd in this singular logic, for he hopped about, despite the fact that his movements started the blood afresh from several gaping wounds; he was as lively as a cricket.

The death of the miners and border ruffians had cast quite a damper over the frequenters

of the gambling saloon, and but few were attracted to the gaming-table that evening. Captain Bob and his pards were huddled together in a rear part of the room, and were conversing in low whispers.

Several times the outlaw chief would utter an approving oath, and wildly gesticulate his views of their secret topic, but the turning of the masked face of Cap. Woodchuck toward him, had the effect of reducing the violence of their conversation.

During the evening, as he sat tipped back in his chair, half asleep, Cecil was startled by hearing a familiar voice in his vicinity, exclaim:

"Please, gents, would you be so kind as to give a few pennies to the off-cast son of an earl, in straitened circumstances? Only a little of the gold, sirs, that you are spending for liquor, would help thy humble servant amazingly."

"Perciflic Pellerkans!" exclaimed Cap. Woodchuck, turning half around from the bar, with a glass of "tonic" in his hand, "an' North Amerykan Polekats; hyar's a quare kerackter, dash my Goat Gruel I tain't. Hey, thar, old man, kum up! Which shall it be—whisky-straight, cock-tail, 'tonic,' or 'pizen'?"

"Neither, sir ranger. My lips hath never yet been polluted with the distilled spirit of hell! May they never be!"

"Holy Polekats!" gasped the borderer; "don't 'bibe corn-juice! Wal, dash my Goat Gruel! That ar' strange. Must be'r sanctimonewes chap, ain't ye? I'll wager thar 'hain't ernuther cuss in ther crowd, who don't 'bibe ockcasionaly; an' he's er miserable kitter as'll go back on corn-juice. What ye want hyar, ennyhow, boss?"

"Only a dime, sir, or a quarter with which to help the widows and orphans. Please, sir."

"Widders and horfans, ar' et? Wal, now, I judge I kin go ye on that. I'm a widder myself—not, not er widder, but a *horfan!* Thet's it. An' then, thar's Dew Drop, my Injun squaw, an' ther darter of Grinnin' Moon, hyar. She's li'ble ter be er widder, w'en my kereer ar' eended, w'ich may be soon. Perciflic Pellerkans! g'eess I will *lift* ye;" and here Cap. Woodchuck slipped a gold piece into the *Earl's* hand. "Thar, now, cl'r out, ole boss."

Presently Uncle Sam passed by where Cecil was sitting, eagerly watching for a chance to draw him aside, for a little conversation. Jonas had, he recollects, told him that the uncouth beggar was the agent of Hurricane Nell, and he resolved, if possible, to ascertain the whereabouts of the wild beauty.

The *Earl* started violently, as Burnett tapped him on the arm.

"Come in here, I want to speak with you a moment," said the lawyer. Uncle Sam eyed him suspiciously from under the rim of his hat.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"Come in here," replied Cecil, drawing into an empty beer-stall.

When they were seated opposite each other, at a low table, Cecil continued:

"You are the agent of Hurricane Nell; therel don't deny it."

"Who told you so?"

"The tavern-keeper."

"Well—what if I am her agent?"

"Where is she?"

"I cannot tell you. She is safe."

"Very probably she is. Where does she live?"

"I cannot tell you."

"You must."

"I cannot—more, will not!"

"Why not?"

"Because I am not allowed to tell her place of residence, to any one."

"But I must see her!"

"What for? I can take a message."

"I want to see her, personally. I wish to arrange with her to accompany me to Cherry Valley."

"I know better," snapped the beggar. "You do not have to go there until the 8th of August. She will see you, ere that time."

"How do you know of the date of my next proposed journey?"

"Oh! I found it out. You told her."

"Yes, so I did. Then I cannot see her?"

"Why do you wish to particularly see her? Have you anything of importance to say?"

"Yes; something of vast import. I wish to tell her that *I love her*, and ask her to become my wife," replied Cecil, earnestly.

The tramp started, strangely.

"Ahem!" he coughed, forcing back an exclamation, that was almost on the end of his tongue. "It would be of no use. She would not *listen* to your declaration of love. Not but what she esteems you, but, you see, her life is one of vengeance—perpetual bloodshed. And, too, she is not safe to come here."

"Do you think she cares for me," asked the young lawyer, quickly, passionately, "more than as a friend?"

"Beyond all doubt. In fact, I believe she loves you. But, young man, you know not the determined nature of the child. Her vengeance is not yet complete, and until it is she will not talk of love. So think no more of that."

"Then, you won't even tell me where I can meet her?"

"No. Now that you have told me your purpose, I would not *dare*. She could not accept you, and to refuse you would only cause her a great deal of needless pain and torture."

"Will she come and act as my guide on the 8th of August?"

"Probably. Indeed, you may see her sooner, but if you do, young man, I beg of you don't speak of love to her. She has yet a fearful record of vengeance to accomplish, ere she can be aught but Hurricane Nell, the Girl Avenger. Now, sir, I must be moving. Good-evening to you."

"Good-evening, sir."

Two days passed.

Great preparations were being made to celebrate the national holiday, and to have a "high old time," as the miners aptly termed it.

Foremost among the festivities was to be the grand "shootin' match," the prize being a large gold nugget, valued at \$1,000; the range, shoulder, and the distance one hundred yards.

Jonas Dwight was conductor of the affair, and had entered five competitors on the list, namely:

"Cap. Woodchuck," "Hardy Scooter," "Grinnin' Moon," "Cap'n Bob," and "Long Neck Pete."

"Governor" Grover, in the meantime, was buried, and at Mrs. G.'s request, Aubrey Lee went down, and took up his quarters at the mansion.

Deeming it the wisest to act on the square, for a while, he had settled the claims of the miners with *good money*, and the banking business went on under his management.

The morning of the Fourth of July dawned, with a clear, sea-blue sky, soft, mellow sunlight, and gentle, balmy breezes; and brought to the little mining settlement as wild and desperate a crowd of borderers and ruffians as ever pulled a trigger.

Far and wide had the news spread, like wildfire; consequently hunters, trappers, guides, and outlaws alike, flocked to the scene of the "celebrate."

By noon, the hour set for the shooting-match to begin, Jonas' list of participants had swelled into the hundreds; and the slope around the town was dotted black with clumps of new arrivals.

At twenty dollars a share, the shrewd tavern-keeper cleared a handsome thing on the gold nugget, and, as a very natural consequence, was all smirks and smiles to every one.

At twelve o'clock a *lane* was formed, by stretching of ropes from post to post; the target was set up, a hundred yards away, and the contest commenced.

According to the rules of the day each man engaged in the affair was to have one shot, and, if several rung the bell, they were to shoot "off," at the close of the match.

Cap' Woodchuck led off, by raising his rifle on a level, taking quick aim, and firing.

"Lady Isabel" showed her head at once.

"Holy Polekats!" ejaculated the ranger, taking a chew of tobacco of huge dimensions. "Know'd I c'u'd fetch them bull's-eye, w'en I glanced along 'Punch-an'-Judith,' hyar!"

Hardy Scooter next took the stand, but failed to score a point.

Grinning Moon was next on the roll, and simultaneous with the flash of his rifle, up popped the phiz of "Lady Isabel."

Cap'n Bob and Long Neck Pete were now ushered forward, and each failed to hit even the board.

Too much "tonic" on board, was the verdict, for, usually, they were splendid shots, and had they been in full possession of their nerves undoubtedly would have rung the bell in turn.

With their bad luck the remainder of the men seemed to side; and only once for the rest of the afternoon did "Lady Isabel" feel called upon to "rise and explain."

"Wust shootin' over I see'd!" was the loudly expressed opinion of Cap' Woodchuck. "Why, Percific Pellerkans, an' North Amerykian Polekats! thar hain't er red nigger 'mongst my gang thet kent beet et, dash my Goat Gruel ef thar ar'."

The shooting "off" between Grinning Moon, Woodchuck, and one Sam Stryker, a tall, handsome hunter, now took place.

The Pawnee chief rang the bell twice, out of three times.

"Good ernuff!" remarked Cap. "Ye ar' improvin', red-skin. But, ye kent hev thet gold, by their Holy Polekat!"

Once, twice and thrice did his long rifle speak forth, and "Lady Isabel" rose each time.

Stryker only recorded two rings, and consequently the prize and laurels of victory were handed over to the masked ranger.

"Percific Pellerkans, an' Goat Gruel!" he shouted, dancing about in high glee, "a thousand dollars in one day. Whoop! Jemima! I reckon as how I'll retire frum bizness, an' 'bibe corn-juice ther rest o' my natteral days. Is ther a man, er 'oman, male or feemale, prisen't, who keers ter bet that I hain't ther Deadshot o' the West? Ef thar is, let him or her step up. Thar ain't ernuth'r kritter livin', as kin beet me shootin'!"

"I can!"

A figure clad in buckskin, with a model of a girlish form, and long, waving hair, pushed quickly through the crowd, and stood by Cap' Woodchuck's side, rifle in hand.

It was Hurricane Nell!

A strange, wild murmur ran through the assemblage, as all eyes fell upon the border beauty.

She was widely known among all classes, and noted as the most unerring shot in the region.

And, too, it was known that Bob Woolf, the outlaw, had boldly offered five hundred dollars to the man who could bring her to him, *alive*. Therefore, it was wondered, by all who knew her, that she dare come thus, so fearlessly forward, when the outlaw-chief and his pards were by.

Cap' Woodchuck started, violently, as his eyes fell upon the pretty face and form of the daring girl, and it was several moments ere he could master his agitation.

"Ye beet me er shootin', gal?" he at last asked, eying her curiously. "Who be ye, ennyhow?"

"I am Hurricane Nell, sir!"

"Hurricane Nell, eh? Wal, that ar' quarrel Hum, yes. W'at d'ye wanter shoot fur? This 'ere nuggit!"

"I do, if I can raise enough to cover it, sir. Gentlemen, is there any one of you, in the crowd, who has faith enough in my aim to advance me the value of this nugget of gold?"

There was no answer, at first. Nobody appeared to be that flush of stamps.

"Better ask Bob Woolf," laughed Hardy Scooter. "Ye've popped over enuff o' his gang ter 'sure him thet ye never shute crook'd."

Cap'n Bob and sixty of his pards were huddled together, in the rear of the crowd, and were watching eagerly for a chance to pounce upon their mortal enemy; but, on account of Cap' Woodchuck and his backers, they did not dare to sail in openly and capture her.

They had lost too many men of late to care to repeat the scene which had occurred only a few days before.

So they waited.

Suddenly a figure stepped to the front, and exclaimed:

"I will cover the amount of the ranger's stake, that Hurricane Nell can out-shoot Cap' Woodchuck, if she has the choice of saying how it shall be done."

The speaker was Cecil Burnett.

"Done!" announced the ranger.

Hurricane Nell gave the young lawyer a wild, half-frightened glance.

"Thank you," she said, in a low voice; "but are you not afraid? I might lose all, and then you would never forgive me."

"I could forgive anything in you," he replied, earnestly, and looking passionately into her loving eyes.

She blushed, grew nervous, and turned away. It was plain she could not talk with him without unconsciously showing her emotion; so she forcibly ended the conversation.

"Gal, I'm ready," said Woodchuck, coolly. "What choice hev ye?"

"I'll show you," replied the maiden.

Procuring a clay pipe from one of the miners, she broke off the bowl, cast it aside, and stuck the stem between her pearly teeth.

Walking down the lane, to the target, she stood upright beside it, in a side position, so that the slender stem was offered as a mark, extending from her mouth in plain view, while the side of her face was toward the shooting stand.

Removing the stem from between her teeth, after showing the example of the target, she addressed Cap' Woodchuck:

"You see my purpose. Let some one count one—two—three—when I have taken my position again. You will then fire at the end of the pipestem, which I shall hold tightly between my teeth. If you break it into two pieces, so be it. I will then try. If I do the same, I will leave you to substitute another test."

The great ranger trembled all over, as Hurricane Nell once more took her dangerous position, and his hand shook as he took up his long rifle, and examined the cap. An inch's variation in his usually unerring aim, might lay the beautiful girl a corpse before him.

Hurricane Nell, however, showed not one sign of trepidation. She stood as immovable and calm as a statue.

Once—twice, and thrice the borderer brought his instrument of death to his shoulder, and as many times lowered it to the ground. But, when it came to a level the fourth time, he held it there.

"One! two! three!" cried Cecil, pale, and fearful of the consequences.

Crack! the whip-like snap of the rifle rung out, and all rushed toward the end of the lane.

Hurricane Nell stood there *unharmed*.

A wild, echoing cheer went up.

The stem remained between her white teeth untouched!

"Thank God!" cried Cecil and the ranger in a breath.

"Hal hal!" laughed the daring maiden, her eyes now almost black and sparkling with excitement. "Now, then, Mr. Woodchuck, take your place, and I'll see if I can do as well. Ain't afraid, are you?"

"Percific Pellerkans, no! Course I'll take your place, daisy. Ther gal never buckled er garter as kin skeer me. Ef ye see me even quiver, gal, plug me in ther freenylogikal skull!"

He received the pipestem from her, thrust it between his teeth, and at once planted himself firmly on the spot, which she had just vacated.

Then Cecil accompanied her back to the

end of the lane and handed her the little rifle, which she had brought along.

Raising it on a level with the distant pipestem, she ran her eye over the sights, while our hero counted;

"One—two—three!"

There was a bright flash, a sharp report; then the anxious multitude waited a second, breathlessly. A wild, awful yell of applause roared above the crowd, like a reverberation of pandemonium.

The bullet had broken off the pipestem close up to Woodchuck's lips!

The crowd surged toward where Cap. stood, grinning his approbation, and for a second Hurricane Nell was left alone at the end of the lane, with the exception of Cap'n Bob and three of his pards.

It was but an instant; but in that brief space of time, she was seized from behind, a gag was thrust into her mouth, and her hands and feet securely bound. Then Cap'n Bob sprung upon the back of a near-standing horse, was handed his helpless captive, and in a moment more, was dashing away, just as Cecil discovered the ruffian's treacherous act.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RESCUE—A DYING MESSAGE.

For Cecil Burnett to think, was to act. Quickly seizing a rifle from one of the miners' hands, he brought it to his shoulder, and fired.

Cap'n Bob's horse immediately slackened its pace to a gallop, and finally stopped stock still, and sunk to the ground.

"Percific Pellerkans! Good enuff!" muttered Cap' Woodchuck; "but hyar's better, ef I doo say et."

He hastily pulled off his hunting-shirt, tightened his belt, and then started off, like a deer, in pursuit, for the outlaw had left the flying animal, and with Hurricane Nell clasped in his arms, was bounding on desperately, determined to reach the grove beyond the mansion of the deceased banker, if possible.

"Come back!" cried Cecil. "This is my game, and you cannot have it!"

But, the iron-framed ranger only gave vent to a wild laugh, and leaped madly on.

All the ire in the young Philadelphian's nature was now aroused, and his eyes blazed with excitement.

In an instant he had put his two forefingers to his lips, and a long, shrill whistle made the air ring. In another moment it was answered by a loud neigh, and the clatter of hoofs. Then the crowd surged apart, as a large, wild-eyed horse bounded into the arena.

Burnett was upon his back in an eye's twinkling; and away, away down over the slopes, like the veritable tornado they sped, amid the furious curses of the outlaw's pards, and the cheers of the miners.

On—on dashed the noble stallion, clearing almost incredible spaces of ground, in his fierce leaps.

As Cecil sailed victoriously past Cap' Woodchuck, the big-hearted ranger swung his new coonskin cap high in the air, and shouted:

"Go et, Buster, go et! I'll guv up beet, but'll bring in, et ther death—cuss my Polekata, ef I don't!"

On leaped Hurricane, seemingly as much interested in overtaking the outlaw as his master; on, on, and the distance was rapidly lessening between pursuers and pursued.

Woolf was bounding desperately on, but he found the form of his prize even heavier than he had dreamed, and consequently, he could make but moderate progress.

His only hope was to gain the grove, now yet half a mile away. Once among the depths, he knew he would be safer, as Cecil could not follow him, on horseback.

On—on, and he heard the loud and heavy foot-strokes behind him—so close that for a single moment he involuntarily stopped, and boldly faced about.

The stern-faced lawyer and his savage-eyed stallion were not forty rods distant, and were sweeping down upon him, like the terrible hurricane.

With a horrible curse, the ruffian chief cast his burden upon the earth, and then again sped on, only too glad of the hope of escaping with his life.

The sheltering trees were now only a short distance further on. Away—on, and still he heard the fierce hoof-strokes, closer behind him than before.

A single swift glance apprised him of all. Knowing Hurricane Nell would be safe for the present, Cecil was impelled to chase the ruffian down, and finish up his career, with a blow from his knife.

Awful curses broke in torrents from Woolf's lips, and he threw almost superhuman strength into his limbs, and tore madly on.

"Halt!" challenged Cecil, drawing a pistol, and cocking it.

"No!—curse ye!" came back savagely.

Past the Grover mansion they flew, and as they did, not three yards intervened between them.

Aubrey Lee, Lotta and Mrs. Grover were standing on the porch, watching with great interest.

Suddenly the clerk drew a pistol, and fired.

"I'll end the ruffian's race!" he replied, in answer to Lotta's shriek.

Had the ladies but known it, that self-same bullet whistled by, not an inch in front of Cecil's forehead!

He turned in his saddle, and as he shook his fist toward the evil-faced clerk, he caught a glimpse of Mrs. Grover, and a deathly pallor overshadowed his own visage.

"My God!" he gasped, reeling as if intoxicated, "can it be possible?"

At this instant Hurricane dashed into the wood, and before he was scarcely aware of it, a low-hanging limb swept the stallion's back, and Cecil fell, heavily upon the ground. Nothing daunted, however, he regained his feet, and glanced around for a glimpse of Cap'n Bob. He had disappeared, but far on ahead, the sounds of his flying footsteps could be distinctly heard. Quickly Cecil bounded away, in hot pursuit. Here, there, everywhere he darted, but to no avail. At the end of an hour he found that he was only wasting time. The outlaw had succeeded in outwitting him, and had made good his escape.

Slowly he returned to where he had left the stallion, mounted him once more, and turned his head out toward the prairie, where he expected to rejoin Hurricane Nell and Cap. Woodchuck.

Soon he came upon the old ranger, down upon his hands and knees, in the tall prairie grass, and searching about, curiously.

"Where is she—Hurricane Nell?" asked Cecil, as he rode up.

"Gone!" muttered Cap., resuming his work, by carefully parting the grass, as he searched with his keen eyes for some concealed object.

"Gone!" echoed Cecil—"gone! How? when? where?"

"Why, ye see," replied the ranger, "wen I found her, I cut her bonds, an' then she sprung ter her feet, an' was off like crooked lightnin', greased wi' Goat Gruel, as ef all ther Polekats on ther conternen, from hyar ter ther equater, were arter her."

"Where? which way did she go? tell me, quickly!"

"Went rite up ter ther settlement, thar, boyee; mounted her hoss, in ther face o' all them 'ar roughs, an' rid off, rapidly, ter ther north."

Cecil groaned.

"Gone—gone, again," he muttered, unconsciously, "and before I could tell her—tell her of my love!"

"Wal, Buster, nevyr ye mind. luv, et present, but clime down hyar an' sarch fur the arrer."

"The arrow?"

"Yas. Jes' arter ther gal escaped, an Injin sumwhar round hyar fired an arrer, an' et

struck down, clus 'bout here. I heerd at fall, an' ar' cur'ous ter kno' w'at et means."

Burnett at once dismounted, and a vigorous search was instituted, resulting in the discovery of the shaft by Cecil.

It was a long arrow, and rolled around it was a sheet of paper, covered with lead-pencil writing.

"Hum!" muttered the young lawyer, detaching the document; "let's see what it means."

He unfolded and straightened it out upon his knee; then, with Cap. Woodchuck looking over his shoulder, scanned the coarsely written lines:

"LUKE RICE'S RANCH, July 3, 18—.

"MR. CECIL BURNETT:

"When you receive this note an' confession, the writer'll be dead. I got knifed down at Woolf's Rendezvous, last night, in a brawl, an' am fast pegging out. But, as I promise ye, I'll make a clean breast o' it, afore I turn up my toes.

"Wal, ter begin with: Years ago, in a pretty New England village—it's a city, now—lived a beautiful maiden named Cecilia Burnett, an' she war as modest, purty peice o' pork as ever ye set yer eyes upon. Wal, thes gal hed two lovviers; an' I, a wuthless, rovin' sorter coon, was one of 'em. The other was a protigie son of a rich mill-owner in ther town.

"Wal, of course she married him, an' he turned out ter be quite a feller, arter all. 'Bout a year arter they war married I got drunk as a beast, an' went down to see 'em, one night. Things went party strate till I kinder insulted his wife, wen he flew at me wi' a knife, an' give me a gouge, the scar of which I bear to-day. Thet riled all the hell in my carkass, an' I swore ter have a terrible revenge, sure pop.

"So one night, I up an' breaks inter their house, wile they war away to town, an' hed left their baby in care of a servant gal; an' I steals the lad away.

"Hevin' no home o' my own, I took him over ter Philadelphia, an' give 'im inter charge o' a chum, Tim Morris, by name. Then I dug out fur parts unknown.

"Wal, Tim used to write to me, an' I to him, an' as he war a good sorter coon, he give ye an eddication, an' I paid 'im fur et. Ye war natterally smart, an' made a strike onther bar—not ther whisky un, but the lawyer bar.

"Erw'ilie ago, Tim writ me he war goin' ter turn up his toes, so I writ back that he c'u'd send ye out ter me, an' I'd tell ye who yer dad an' mam war. Wal, ye cum, arter Tim died, an' I've heerd since that he left ye a heap o' money. Wal, I'm glad o' that. I told ye I'd tell ye all on ther 8th o' August. Thet war ther day I stole ye. But since I've got knifed, I ken't keep ye waitin' no longer. Yer p'entses names ar' Cecilia an' Felicia Grover. They live b'lown Dwight's settle—"

Here the writing stopped, and the confession was ended.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BURNED FACE.

THREE days passed.

Cap. Woodchuck and Cecil still lingered at Dwight's.

The former was anxiously awaiting Cap'n Bob's return, while the young lawyer was patiently waiting for an answer from Mrs. Grover, to whom he had sent the documentary confession of poor, sinning Luke Rice.

Also he was eagerly watching for a chance to see Hurricane Nell, as Cap. had thrown out a hint that she might put in an appearance at almost any moment.

On the third evening succeeding the events described in the previous chapter, a large posse of men had come in to the tavern, for the sole and soul-inspiring purpose of having a spree—a downright drunk.

And, much to his satisfaction, the masked ranger perceived that Bob Woolf was among the gang.

He, Hardy Scooter, Long Neck Pete, and two of his worst pals from Cherry Valley, named respectively Pill-Box and Guzzler, monopolized one table in the rear of the gambling-saloon, and took to draw poker, excessively.

By and by Cap. Woodchuck sauntered in, and, spying out Cap'n Bob, brought along a stool, and seated himself at a narrow corner of the table.

"What d'ye want here?" demanded the chief, gruffly, though there was less of the bully in his behavior than usual. "Git out!"

"Holy Polekats!" ejaculated the ranger, feigning great surprise, "ye 'ain't no objections ag'in my seein' ye play draw poker, hev ye?"

"Yes, I hev; I don't wan' ye 'round, so get out, afore I lift ye!"

"I'll shin when I git ready, Bob Woolf, an' not afore, so go'n wi' yer game."

After eying the ranger's herculean form for a moment the chief turned and began shuffling the cards.

Cap. watched the course of the game for upward of an hour; then, inserting one finger in a little pocket in his shirt, he brought out a piece of paper, and presented it to Cap'n Bob, coolly.

The ruffian glanced at the writing, then grew strangely pale. It was in a large, rambling hand, and the paper read as follows:

"I'll giv' ye jest five—no, ten hours ter leave—cl'r out, and nevyr sho' yer hed in thes ranch ergin. Ef ye, or enny o' yer crew's hyar at daylight, why yer ha'r b'longs ter Grinnin' Moon. Remember!

"Yers, dootifully, X."

"Man, devil—or what the deuce are ye, ennyhow!" gasped the outlaw.

"D'ye wanter know, partie'lar bad, eh?" asked the ranger, with a low, meaning laugh. "Wal'f ye do, then, I g'ess I'll hev ter gratify ye, fur onc't; see'f ye reckognize thes 'ere bu'tiful counternance?"

With a swift, dextrous movement, he tore the skin mask away, and turned his face toward the ruffians, in the full light of the candle.

It was a horrible sight.

From the roots of the hair above the forehead, to the end of the chin, was one awful fiery, livid scar, which only the blaze of fire could have produced. In places deep spots told where roasted flesh had dropped from the ghastly visage, and as for a nose he had none at all. It had been burned entirely off!

The five ruffians recoiled with a shudder. Accustomed as they were to disgusting and ghastly sights, the scarred face before them was too horrible to gaze upon.

"Haw! haw!" leered the ranger, with a grin that rendered his visage positively hideous, "don't admire et, much, eh? Thort ye wouldn't. Wal, then I'll put et ter sleep!"

Whereupon he replaced his mask.

"Don't wonder I keep et outer sight, do ye? Why, Holy Polekates and Goat Gruel! ef er photograffer'd ever git a peep at thet phiz, he'd nevyr sleep easy, till he hed my pictur'!"

"For God's sake, who are you?" again gasped Cap'n Bob, his face as white as the ceiling overhead, and his knees knocking together with fear.

"Who ar' I? Wal, Bob Woolf, I am the man who, five years ago, lay ter bed, down wi' the small-pox. I am the feller ye tried ter burn up, in thet prairie, but failed to, an' only made a botch job over; an' last, but not least, I'm Bill Allen, the Kansas Spotter!"

With yells of genuine terror, the five guilty wretches leaped from their seats, at the gam-table, and fled pell-mell from the saloon, as if the Black Imp himself was after them.

When morning dawned over Dwight's settlement, neither Cap'n Bob nor a single man of his notorious ruffian band, longer graced the

breakfast-table; they had flown, like the vulture, to better fields of prey.

Soon after breakfast, two horsewomen rode up to the tavern, and inquired for Cecil.

On appearing, he was surprised to find that they were Mrs. Grover and her beautiful daughter, Lotta.

Pen fails us in describing the joyful meeting between the mother and her long-lost son.

Suffice to say, that it was a most happy one, as the widow had at once recognized the truth of Luke Rice's confession, and longed to clasp her darling to her breast.

Lotta, too, greeted her brother with all a sister's love, and affection, and altogether the young man was nearly overwhelmed with love and kisses.

After the first rapturous greeting was over, Cecil was prevailed upon to mount Hurricane, and accompany them back to the mansion.

Then came the story of the recent bank robbery, the sad death of his father, and, last of all, Lotta confided to him the secret of her engagement to Aubrey Lee.

During the day Cecil inquired into affairs, in general, and on an interview with Lee, at the office, found that no money at all was left the family, and that the estates were mortgaged to the wily clerk.

"I will pay off the mortgage, sir," said the young heir, taking out his wallet and counting out the specified sum named on the document. "There, now, this bank, and the Grover property are mine. Beware how you intrude. And, above all, let me never catch you in company with my sister, or I'll thrash the life out of you."

Fully satisfied with the financial character of his recent operations, Lee was henceforth a clerk no longer; but, instead, took rooms at Dwight's, and played the sport.

One day Cap. Woodchuck, who still remained with Grinning Moon and his warriors, near the settlement, set off on horseback toward the north. He was well armed, and, save his strangely masked face, made as fine a picture of the hardy ranger as ever straddled a saddle.

The day was sultry and breathless, but the rider seemed to notice it not, for he spurred rapidly on, until about noon, when he struck into a wild, mountainous tract of country, and then, presently came to a deep and gloomy forest, which covered two immense peaks of the mountains.

Leaving his horse to graze in the luxuriant grass near the edge of this wood, the ranger strode into the shadows, cast thick and dark by the leafy branches overhead. He examined the ground carefully, as he advanced, but not a leaf showed signs of having been lately disturbed. Nothing daunted, however, he kept on for several hours, searching here, there, and everywhere with the greatest care and scrutiny, but failed to find what he was searching for.

Up the mountain side, over frightful precipices and into yawning chasms he plunged, his eyes bent constantly upon the ground before and around him, as if seeking a trail.

But the sun went down, and darkness fell over mountain and forest, without discovering to the ranger that which he sought—the trail of Hurricane Nell.

He had dreamed a strange dream the night before, a dream which had caused him to make this trip into the northern wilderness.

In the dream, he found himself hunting in this identical forest, with these same mountains towering around him, grim and frowning.

All day he had been tracking a huge grizzly, but without once getting a glimpse of the savage beast.

When about to give up in despair, at the close approach of night, he had crossed a plain trail—a trail not of the lumbering bruin, but of a person or of persons. It ran direct up the mountain side, and here and there, a small imprint told the experienced trailer that a female had trodden; and that female he knew could be no other than Hurricane Nell.

He followed the trail.

It led him far up the steep ascent of the rugged peaks, and to a small, natural cave in

the side of the mountain. Here he found an abode, fitted up in the primitive style of the frontier, but there was no occupant to it.

Believing it to be the house of Hurricane Nell, he had seated himself and waited for her coming—waited till the night wore away, and morning dawned, bright and clear. Then thoroughly discouraged, he left the cave, and having assured himself that she was not hiding in the neighborhood, he set off to follow the trail to the other termination, hoping to there obtain a clue of the strange girl's whereabouts.

For hours he had followed it, through wild mountain gorges, into dense chaparrals of timber, and over precipitous crags and chasms, until finally it debouched into the open prairie. Here he was surprised to find that it led directly toward Dwight's.

Mounting his horse he had followed the trail like a bloodhound.

Then, in his dream, arose a vivid picture of a secluded spot about a mile from the settlement; a small glade surrounded by a dense thicket of mesquit.

For a long time no one entered the moonlit glade, and silence reigned profound. But, at last, there came the sound of horses' hoofs, and Hurricane Nell dashed out into view.

Then from the mesquit thicket there leaped a swarming horde of savage-faced men, with triumphant yells, and the Girl Deadshot was borne from her saddle, a helpless captive in the power of Cap'n Bob Woolf, who now appeared upon the scene to claim his prize.

It was at this juncture that Woodchuck had awakened, to find himself in a dripping perspiration, and quite unnerved. During the remainder of the night he was restless and uneasy. Do what he would, he could not drive the picture of his dream away—it haunted him like a phantom.

In the morning he arose, and still he was troubled in mind, and his thoughts kept reverting to Hurricane Nell and the trail in the forest.

Where the glade was located he could not form any idea, but he distinctly remembered of having hunted in the forest, and had no doubt he could discover the trail, if, indeed, such a trail existed.

So deeply was he impressed by the dream, that at last he could no longer bear the torturing thought of the brave girl being in peril, and, therefore, he determined to ride to the forest, and institute a search, to satisfy himself on the matter.

And now he stood in the depths of the same timber, completely baffled in his work; and, moreover, perfectly satisfied that he had come all the way from Dwight's on a fool's errand.

No such trail was to be found, he told himself, and, certainly, it was plain that no person had lately trodden where the keen-eyed ranger had.

Darkness hung like a black pall over the earth, and it was impossible to further continue the search.

So, shouldering his rifle, Cap. turned back toward where he had left his horse.

But, in the intricacies of the timber, he lost his bearing, and roamed about for fully an hour without succeeding in reaching the prairie.

This somewhat annoyed him, for he was now desirous of starting for Dwight's without delay.

But, turn whither he would, he could not extricate himself from what seemed to have suddenly grown into a labyrinth of towering trees.

And, too, the gloom was so intense that he could not see his hand before his face, and he was compelled to go by the sense of feeling.

Finally, becoming tired and discouraged, he seated himself upon a fallen tree, and peered about in the Stygian gloom.

Nothing but the tall trunks of the forest monarchs rose on every side.

"Quare!" muttered the discomfited ranger, half angry at himself for his negligence in not keeping a better idea of his movements. "I nevver got so discomfuddled afore in my life,

dash my Gruel! I did. These 'ere trees seem all strange, like. Party fix I'm in; squatin' hyar on ther mountain-side, loike er buzzard stray'd frum his flock. Holy Polekats!"

This exclamation was caused by the slipping of his foot into a slight depression in the ground before him—a little hollow as it were, such as might have been worn there by the frequent tread of feet, hard and smooth.

Many more experienced bordermen than Cap. Woodchuck would not have thought the second time of the matter. On the contrary, he noticed it in an instant.

Reaching one hand carefully forward, he touched the spot, and then drew forward on his hands and knees, feeling along over the ground.

It was indeed a path, of the width which might have been made by one person, or by several of them walking in single file.

When satisfied upon this point, the ranger crept back to the log, and deliberately broke off a knot, which being pine, he had no difficulty in igniting with a match, a plenty of which he ever carried about his person.

By aid of the bright light thus afforded, he next proceeded to examine the depression, or path. It was crooked one, and evidently one much used, as it was well worn. It ran directly up the mountain side, and came from off in the forest, back of where Woodchuck had been sitting.

No doubt it led out of the wood, in this latter direction, and to some place of abode in the former.

"Et ar' ther indentickal trail I see'd in my night-hoss," muttered Cap., reflectively; "that's almost sarting. But, Perciflic Pellerkans an' North Amerikan Polekata, w'ich way leads ter where?"

He had not the slightest idea, at first, which direction to pursue. If there was a cave or cabin at this mountain end of the path, he was anxious to discover it, and ascertain whether or not it was inhabited by Hurricane Nell. If, on the other hand, the opposite course would lead him from the forest, and to that wild glade, he was equally desirous of proceeding thitherward. Which direction should he go? That was the question, now.

He spent nearly an hour in turning the matter over in his mind, and at the expiration of that time, started off down the mountain-side, rifle and torch in hand, having decided to escape from the wood, in preference to spending the remainder of the night therein.

The trail or path was very plain, but it led the ranger through many intricate passages and tangled thickets, ere it opened out into the prairie.

Here he discovered that he had entered the wood some two miles above, and that he would have to go thither to obtain possession of his horse. Therefore, in order to mark his starting-point, he kindled a fire of dry cones upon the trail, and then set off.

He experienced no difficulty in finding and securing his horse; after which he retraced his footsteps to the beacon-fire. Here he once more lit his torch, and took up the trail again, his animal following close behind.

For several hours both man and beast moved on—on over the rolling prairie, making a strange weird spectacle as viewed beneath the flaring light of the torch.

The trail was not hard to follow, although it was less plain than in the woodland, and consequently, Woodchuck was enabled to make quite rapid progress.

When not more than a mile distant from Dwight's settlement, which loomed up dark and silent in the gloomy night, the ranger found himself in a small open space, fringed by low-growing, mesquit bushes. It might have been called a glade had the stunted shrubs been taller. He at once recognized it as being the place he had seen so vividly pictured, in his dream, and he began a close and hasty scrutiny of the ground.

True enough, he soon discovered where Hurricane Nell had ridden into the glade, and

where the trail of her horse was obliterated by the imprints of many booted feet.

After all, had the ranger's dream come true? Had Bob Woolf and his gang indeed intercepted the fearless maiden, on the night after their flight from the saloon, and carried her off?

Everything went to show that such was the case.

The dream; the discovery of the trail, when despair had entered the hunter's heart; the pursuit, and the finding of the glade; and the unmistakable footprints of the border-ruffians—did it not all incline toward the theory portrayed to Woodchuck in his strange nocturnal fancy?

He unhesitatingly decided in the affirmative, and grew savage and excited, as he stood there beneath the somber sky, torch in hand.

"Gone! Hurricane Nell, the beautiful Deadshot, gone!" It seemed to fill the heart of the herculean ranger with a terrible fire, and he walked to and fro, as he dwelt upon the undeniable conclusion.

He muttered a fierce malediction upon the head of that ruffian-outlaw, who had been such a curse to the existence of him and his.

Should he start even now for Cherry Valley, and undertake to liberate the brave girl, and avenge her wrongs, as well as his own?

No; he would wait till morning, and then with his valiant band, would sweep down upon the foe, a merciless avenger.

No sooner had he made this resolution, than he extinguished his torch, sprung into the saddle, and galloped away toward the settlement.

Dwight's was open day and night, and the ranger walked boldly into the bar-room, on his arrival, and was somewhat surprised to find both Cecil and Grinning Moon there, evidently awaiting his coming.

"Ha!" exclaimed the former, extending his hand, cordially, "I am glad you have come. Grinning Moon here, has been telling me of your absence, and I was just now about proposing that we go in search of you."

Cap. laughed a little, but it was not his old, free laugh, that escaped from his lips.

"Holy Polekats!" he said, stroking his masked face slowly, "that's no danger o' the Woodchuck's gittin inter a hoel he ken't burrow out o'. His existence hain't goin ter last fer ever, that's er fact; but, Percifick Pellerkans! I judge he's gude for er few more skewerups, yit."

"Ugh!" said Grinning Moon, grimly. "Woodchuck heap much brave."

"Reckon I ar," was the laconic reply.

After the ranger's arrival, Cecil did not remain long, as the hour was late, and he was to return to the mansion to sleep.

"Come up early in the morning!" said Cap., as they parted. "I've made er diskivery as 'll be likely ter interest ye. Don't fail me, mind."

Cecil promised to come as soon as he awoke, and then mounting Hurricane, he set off.

Cap. Woodchuck went back into the saloon, which he had left on the departure of Cecil, and ordering Grinning Moon off to bed, he dropped into a chair and fell into a deep reverie.

He had not advised the young lawyer of the undoubted captivity of Hurricane Nell, among the ruffians, for he well knew Cecil would not sleep a wink, if so informed, and this was contrary to his wishes, as he desired that the young "Buster" should be well prepared for the coming journey, and for a fierce and desperate undertaking.

As to himself—well, what mattered it whether he slept or not? If at all, it was but for a moment at a time, as it were; for he was ever restless and watchful—always on the alert both night and day. It was in his nature to be thus.

CHAPTER XIV.

"SPECIMEN BRICK"—ON THE WAY.

EARLY in the following morning, Cecil repaired to the tavern, and found Cap. there in waiting for him.

Grinning Moon was also at hand, having been recently awakened by the ranger.

"What is it you wish to tell me?" asked Cecil, as soon as they had exchanged greetings. "Have you heard, or seen aught of Hurricane Nell?"

"Holy Polekata, yes!" returned Woodchuck, "or somethin' ter that erreck."

He then narrated the remarkable dream, and how he had made the discoveries of the trail and visionary glade; how he had found the imprints of many booted feet, and, last of all, how he had arrived at the conclusion that the Girl Deadshot was a prisoner among the ruffians if, indeed, they had not been tempted even to kill her, to avenge the deaths of their companions.

Cecil was greatly excited at once, and ready for anything that would accomplish the release of the wild maiden, whom he so deeply loved.

"And you will go with your band?" he queried, earnestly, "and attempt to free her?"

"Sartin," replied Woodchuck; "sartin. Percifick Pellerkans an' North Amerykan Polekats! ye don't take me fer sich er'n ornery chipmunk as'd le've thet daisy ermong them helions, do ye? Not by a six-bladed jack-knife, I won't!"

"Good! I will accompany you, then. Hurricane Nell must be rescued, or Heaven alone knows what will be her fate. And, if she was captured as you say, on the night of Woolf's flight, only think of the many hours she has been in the ruffian's power."

"Perzactly. Howsumdever, we ken't prevent that, now. All we ken do, ar' to straddle our anymiles, guy 'em ther rein, and sweep down inter Cherry Valley, loike er North Amerykan swarm o' polekats, an' obbligerate 'em cussed outlaws as ef they war er passel o' wuthless nincompoops, whic'h they ain't nuthin' more'r less. I judge et'll be er dumblasted scrimmage, fer that's five o' them ter one on us; but, nevyerabitless, my motter is abstrackted frum the Golden Ruler, an' ken't fail ter work—'Nevyar git down in ther jaws, 'cause ye ken't klimo over er'n obstickle, but take er chaw o' Fig-Tail, an' wait yer time. Now, I've known thet 'er motter's chuck fuller o' wisdom nor er pack-mule load o' dickshunarys er almeninx. Fer instance, thar war ther time, up at Fort Lar'mie, w'en I wrassled wi' that onmerciful big Soo, Dog-Snot."

"Wagh!" interrupted Grinning Moon, gravely; "Woodchuck's tongue run fast and long, like garter-snake. No time to lose. Must be off on trail. Ugh!"

"K'rect, Grinner, by the Holy chant o' the North Amerykan Polekats! Glad ye spoke, or that's no tellin' when I shed've stopped. Ye see, my tungo ar jes' like ther pendulum o' an eight-day clock, wi' ther pendulix off frum et. Ther pendulix ar' ther dufunny on ther eend o' ther consarn, an' w'en ye take this off, ther rest o' ther masheen goes off like crook'd lightnin', lubricated wi' Goat Gruel. That's jes' ther perzact case wi' my instrument o' speech. But, remov' ther cap o' ther enterprise, an' ther hull combinashun mooves off as freely an' slickerish as er'n eel in er bath-tub. Gosh! that I ar' ergin, wastin' preshus time, like er big lubber. That won't nevyer resky ther Herrykane, by no sort o' means. Now or 'bout this experdishun, Buster. Ar' ye reddy, immetigely?"

"Yes—or shall be, as soon as I obtain my rifle and revolvers, which I left at the mansion," replied Cecil.

"K'rect. Now, then, jes' ye ride down ter ther ranche; then, by ther time ye've armed yerself, and got all in rediness, I an' Grinnin' Moon'll kin boomin' erlong arter ye, an' we'll all sit out fer Cherry Valley."

Cecil bowed, and, turning on his heel, quitted the tavern.

As soon as he was gone, Woodchuck turned to the Pawnee chief.

"Now, cheef, jes' ye go'n grin at yer redskins, an' git 'em in fightin' trim. Hev 'em all bossed, by ther time I kin down, so's no time'll be foolishness erway. I'll 'bibe er few tumblers o' corn-juice, an' by so doin' stiddy my narves, wharupon we'll start."

Grinning Moon hurried away to attend to

his duties, while the masked ranger walked up to the bar, and called up the "bottle."

He was not a temperance man, this Cap. Woodchuck, by any means, for although he never got the worse for its use, he took his liquor regularly, and seemed to derive a certain benefit therefrom. His was one of those rugged, iron constitutions possessed by a class of the stalwart bordermen, and whisky stimulated but did not intoxicate.

After gulping down several glasses of the best "tonic" Dwight's afforded, he tightened his belt, put fresh cartridges in his revolvers, and prepared to follow Grinning Moon.

"Hello!" saluted a rough-dressed and be-whiskered miner, who had been partaking of lunch in an empty beer-stall close by, and had overheard the conversation between Cecil and the ranger. "Hold up a bit, boss."

"W'at d'y'e want?" demanded Cap., surveying the speaker, critically, for he was an odd-looking specimen of the "lower gulcher," whom he had not met before. "Who d'y'e mean by 'Hallo'?"

"You," replied the miner, advancing and extending his hand in a friendly fashion. "Yer Cap. Woodchuck, ain't yer, an' yer bound fer Cherry Run arter Woolf an' his gang, ain't yer?"

"Wal, y-a-s; but w'at' I am?"

"Wouldn't keef er ye hed er coon erlong wi' ye, as knowed ev'ry crook nor corner o' ther Rendezvous, would ye?"

"Wal, that depends, sumw'at. D'y'e refer ter yourself, as bein' that coon?"

"I do, as sure's Eve chased Ain an' Cable outside ther picket-fence o' Eeden. I'm ther eyedentical essence o' human possyiveness, as ken show ye ther whar 'n' wharefore o' Bob Woolf, an' his two-legged cattymounts, in less time than enny other descendant o' George Washington er Christifer Columbjy!"

"Holy Polekats! ye don't say?" ejaculated Woodchuck, eying the stranger with considerable interest, as well as amusement. "An' w'at mought I call ye—who be ye?"

"Who ar' I? Who ar' I? Now, soak my feet in puddin' n' milk, but that ar' er queshion, chock full o' singeelarateness."

"Who ar' I? Wal, I'll gratify yer hyperbolical inquisitiveness. Fustly, I'm ther 'specimen brick' o' Honduras Gulch, polished off wi' alkali, quartz an' granit'. Seckontly, I'm ther ragin', tempestuous, equatorial conglomerashun o' combustiveness; an' last, but not least, I'm Uriah Pottsdamer Billings, ther terror-perdoocing, awe-inspirin', rantankeross, an' dangerous fist-slinger from Slinktown; er high gradewyate o' ther science o' pullin' triggers an' slittin' weazands; and ter cap ther climax wi', I'm er Honery Ex-member o' ther Woolf regyment, fust cavalree, seckont dervision—"

"Whoa!" interrupted Woodchuck, aghast, "that'll ans'er; that's ernuff! I've got ther biggest kind o' er'n ijee who ye be, already; so please put ther clapper onter yer throttle-valve. Ye mean ter insinyuate that yer er dissolved partnershiparian o' ther rufians, an' would offer yer services ag'in their behalf. Ain't that it?"

"Et ar, perzip! soak my feet in brine ter six y'ars, ef tain't. Bob Woolf he gi' me ther boost an' ther bounce, 'ca'se I downed his best bottle o' Nongaheela, one night, cuss his pictur'; so I'm spurred an' heeled, an' spilin' ter sail down ergin him, an' pay him off—blood an' butcher-knives, ya!"

"Well, then, hyar's yer chance," said Cap., starting for the door. "Kim rite erlong ef yer got ennythunk ergin Bob Woolf; fer I'm erbuttar ter set arter him, like a rippin' an' roarin' tornado o' North Amerykan Polekats, slidin' down er slab greased wi' Goat Gruel!"

The "specimen brick" from Honduras Gulch, procured a long, handsomely-mounted rifle from inside the beer-stall, and followed the stalwart ranger from the tavern, with evident satisfaction.

Beside his rifle, he was otherwise well-armed with revolvers and knife, and though rather stalwart and thin of stature, he looked as if he might prove a formidable foe in a scrimmage.

His features were mainly hidden beneath a thick, heavy beard, and very little of his eyes could be seen for the enormous shaggy eyebrows; yet Cap. Woodchuck, who counted himself an excellent judge of character, saw in the ex-robber a man who would undoubtedly prove a valuable accessory, in the coming journey against the outlaws of Cherry Run.

In the course of ten moments they reached the Pawnee camp, and found that Grinning Moon had all his warriors mounted in readiness, for the start, and was mounted himself.

Cap. soon explained the presence of "specimen brick," and it was finally arranged that one of the Pawnees should remain at Dwight's, to keep an "eye out," as it were, while his horse was turned over to Uriaher.

Then the little band dashed away, headed by the stalwart Woodchuck, toward the Grover mansion.

Cecil had equipped himself, and was waiting on the back of Hurricane, when they dashed up.

"Good!" said Cap., as the young lawyer joined in alongside, and they galloped on without making a halt; "now we've got er tolerable start, an' kin fetch ther Valley by ter-morrer noon, 'thout skeerly sweatin' our any-miles. Holy Polekats! don't I wish I war thar now, tho'! I feel jis' like gougin' ther eyes outen a passel o' them warmints!"

Cecil nodded his approval, but said little or nothing for several hours. He was distressed and worried about her whom he loved so truly, and did not feel like conversing.

What fate would be hers if any delay was experienced in rescuing her? He shuddered to think of her helplessness. For years she had been a terrible scourge to the ruffian band—a mortal enemy, unconquerable and merciless. Were they the men, then, to have compassion on her, now that they had her so surely in their power?

No they could invent no torture too good for her—they would treat her to the most fiendish device of suffering within their grasp.

During the first hour of the journey Cecil was introduced to the ex-robber, but he did not like his appearance. There was something familiar about him, yet the young lawyer could not remember of any former meeting between them. "Specimen Brick," however, seemed to manifest a singular interest in Cecil, and when not observed, as he thought, eyed him almost savagely from beneath his shaggy brows.

On dashed the cavalcade through the morning sunlight, the shod hoofs of their steeds ever and anon producing a sharp musical ring, while the thud, thud upon the green-carpeted earth sounded like the beating of so many ponderous drum-sticks.

But there was not one in the band who was aware that they were followed—followed far away, then side-circled in a neat manner, and finally headed off, until they saw a horseman in front of them, near the edge of a prairie motte.

Not ten moments after Cap. Woodchuck and "Specimen Brick" had left the tavern another man left the saloon by a side door, and mounted a horse tethered close by.

Skirmishing dexterously around to a thicket on the upper side of the Pawnee camp, this horseman watched the cavalcade ride off, down to the Grover mansion; saw Cecil join them, and then saw the whole party pass along the western side of the grove to the prairie beyond.

Shaking his fist after them, he wheeled his spirited animal into the ravine rear at hand, and spurred rapidly off to the south-west.

The cavalcade was proceeding very slightly east of south, and were not urging their animals beyond an easy gallop. Consequently, at the mad speed to which the single horseman put his animal, he soon was far in advance of the other party.

The ravine or little valley was about ten miles in length, but by taking a cross cut the lone rider reached the great plains fully half an hour before the cavalcade, at which he bore

off directly east and struck a little motte almost on a line with Woodchuck's route. All this was done without being observed, as the sun partly glared in the eyes of the rangers, thus preventing their noticing the lone horseman.

The first knowledge they had of his presence was when they reached the edge of the motte, and beheld him sitting easily upon his foam-flecked steed, calmly awaiting their approach.

"Perciflc Pellerkans an' North Amerikan Polekats!" ejaculated Cap., reining in his steed, as the band rode up, and staring hard at the stranger, through the eye-holes in his mask. "Who d'y'e purtend to say you ar, eh?"

"My name is Guaymo Hidago, senor!" was the reply, in a low, musical voice.

"Er Greaser, hey?"

"A Mexican—yes, senor."

"Don't like 'm!" said Cap., with a gesture calculated to express his disgust. "Bad eggs—phew! I'd le've be forced ter live all th' natteral days o' my existence wi' a hull kit o' rattlesnakes, as ter keep company wi' er Greaser for twenty-four 'ours. Holy Polekats, yes. They're bad decockshuns o' compy-sishun!"

"Cosita!" replied Hidago, with a grimace, "opinions differ, somewhat, senor. I argue that Mexicans are just as good as Yankees."

In the meantime Cecil had been eying the stranger, furtively.

He was just a trifle above the medium height, with an elegantly proportioned form, small yet handsome features, and eyes of peculiar grayish luster. His complexion was nearly as dark as an Indian's, and he sported a pair of luxuriant "Burnsides" and a little curling mustache. Taken altogether, from his personal appearance to his wild Mexican garb, he was a strange character to encounter, so far from his native country; still in those great mining regions, one need not be surprised to meet a man from the antipodes, as it were, for one, all, and everybody flocked to the golden fields.

Another among those in the cavalcade than Cecil, eyed the Mexican with interest, watched him from under a pair of shaggy eyebrows, as if he was distrustful and suspicious. He was the ex-robber, "Specimen Brick."

"Humph!" ejaculated Woodchuck, in answer to the stranger's fearlessly expressed opinion, "don't ye git sassy, now, or, Holy Polekats! I'll de'cent ont'er ye like er sham-scrouglin' avalanche. I opine I c'u'd chaw ye up in erbout a fie-skip, by ther town-clock."

"I do not think necessity will require you to exert yourself, senor," laughed Hidago, seemingly taking it all in good part. "But, aside with jesting, senors; may I be so bold as to inquire if you propose making your destination Cherry Valley?"

This question was directed more to Cecil than to Woodchuck, and the young lawyer took it upon himself to answer it:

"Yes; we are on our way to Cherry Valley. Why do you ask?"

"Cosita! then I am glad; perhaps I can enlist you in my cause. Listen, I will explain.

"While hunting the buffalo yesterday, near this nest of outlaws, a band of them pounced down upon me, and my fair companion, Senorita Gasconai, was captured. I fit like *el demonio*, and only escaped the hot pursuit the devils gave me an hour since. Seeing your approach, I spurred over to this motte, to intercept you, and beg your assistance in securing my betrothed wife!"

"Which shall be granted," said Cecil. "We are even now upon the war-path, against the border-ruffians; so fall in, and you shall share such as we have, for the senorita's sake."

"Y-a-e, fall in," accorded Cap., rather dubiously, "but jes' keep back 'mung ther Injuns. Ef ye were to ride too cluss to me, I mought get nervous, an' there's no tellin' w'at ther consquences'd be. Yas, jine in—an' gee up, fellers an 'glang! We've alredyy lost preshus time."

And the cavalcade moved on.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FAIR PRISONER'S HORRIBLE DOOM.

CAP. WOODCHUCK'S dream had come true. Hurricane Nell, the beautiful sharp-shooter, was captured, as he had seen pictured in his remarkable nocturnal vision. It happened something after this fashion:

On the same night that had witnessed the flight of Woolf and his gang from the saloon at Dwight's, the Girl Deadshot might have been seen riding along a well-beaten trail, leading from the mountains toward the mining settlement.

She was well mounted and armed, and sat her spirited steed like a queen cavalier.

As the animal she rode was well acquainted with the route before him, she allowed him to take his own course, while she gave herself up to reflection.

It was now three days since the shooting tournament at Dwight's, and therefore, a like period since she had seen Cecil Burnett, or Grover, as we shall henceforth call him. Three long weary days to the wild young flower of the frontier, during which time she had been restless and impatient, and longing to see him, to whom her heart had gone out, as it were, with its great wealth of love, during their eventful journey across the plains.

And now!

She could not—would not remain in seclusion, any longer. She would venture forth from her mountain home, she would risk everything, if need be, to obtain one glimpse of the handsome young Philadelphian. Not that she had the least thought of allowing him to recognize her, for she was well aware that such an action would only cause pain to both, so long as her role of vengeance was unfulfilled. But, unknown to him, she would enter his presence, and maybe talk to him, and listen to the music of his rich, deep voice.

With this object in view, she had left her mountain retreat, and, mounting her noble steed, had sallied forth on her mission.

The night was one of heavy darkness, as the sky was overcast with ominous, somber clouds, and only a faint breeze was stirring.

Nature seemed wrapped in deepest slumber, as the fearless girl rode on, and a strange, moody silence pervaded the earth—a silence according well with her lonely, silent life and her present spirits.

When about a mile distant from the little glade, which we have previously described, she drew rein, and dismounted. Let us now watch her closely, and here make a discovery.

Taking from her saddle-bags a small bundle, she arrayed her faultless form in the garments contained therein, and in five moments, with the aid of false beard, wig, and a trifle of paint, she stood transformed into the "son of an Earl," in straitened circumstances.

Yes, she was an exact copy of the old vagrant whom we have met on several occasions at Dwight's—indeed, she was the same, for in order to visit the tavern unbeknown to the outlaws, she had assumed this disguise, merely keeping up the farce of begging to ward off any suspicions that might arise in the minds of her enemies.

How cleverly she managed, the reader has already seen.

As soon as she had completed her change, she remounted her horse, and galloped on toward the settlement, her pure young heart thrilling as she thought of once more meeting Cecil—Cecil who was now dearer to her than life itself.

On, over the green-carpeted turf, on through the somber still night, she dashed, and at last the low mesquit bushes loomed up before her, and her horse plunged through them into the little glade beyond.

Then, all at once, she became aware of the presence of others.

Her animal was seized by the bit, and hurled back upon his haunches; there was a fierce, exultant cry, as a horde of dusky forms leaped from the covert and swarmed around her; and the next instant she felt herself borne from the

saddle, and pinioned in the grasp of many cruel hands.

She tried to scream, but could not, a piece of blanket being quickly fastened into and across her mouth. She struggled fiercely, but it was to no avail. The clutches of the exultant ruffians were like vise.

She was undeniably a prisoner.

Without delay her captors hastened to bind her, hand and foot.

When this was accomplished, a man emerged from the mesquit bushes hard by, bearing a bull's-eye lantern in his hand.

The poor girl now trembled, despite her efforts to appear calm, for she recognized in the repulsive wretch coming toward her, the most savage of all her enemies, Bob Woolf.

"Hev ye got ther old covey, b'yees?" demanded the ruffian, as he shot the full rays of the lantern upon the disguised maiden.

"You bet!" muttered Pill-box, who had been foremost among the gang; "got 'im nice 'er bug in a rug!"

"Good! Now, we're on ther road ter findin' out whar' ther gal is, then. Bring 'im erlong, an' we'll set out fer ther rendezvous, 'cause I ain't particular fond o' stayin' 'round hyar at present, arter w'at I see'd up tha," and the outlaw cast a fierce glance toward the tavern.

Hurricane Nell listened eagerly, and her heart gave a wild bound as she comprehended that she was only recognized as the beggar, Uncle Sam.

Further words were not deemed necessary by the ruffians, and preparations were immediately made for departure from the glade.

Guzzler was sent for the horses, and soon returned to the southern edge of the bushes with them, whereupon the whole band mounted, Cap'n Bob carrying his captive across the saddle in front of him. Pill-Box then led the way, followed by Woolf and the rest of the gang, and they all galloped off in the direction of Cherry Valley.

No halt was made during the night, but in the morning they drew rein, and dismounted. A few prairie hens were shot and dressed, and when cooked over a small fire, made quite a relishable meal.

As soon as the repast was ready, Cap'n Bob released his prisoner's arms and disengaged the gag, so that she could speak.

"Thar, cuss ye," he growled, "I guess ye ken't do much harm; fer that's no one out hyar's kin heer yer yowlin', an' I ain't ertall afeard o' w'at ye ken do wi' yer fista. How d'y'e feel erbout thes' time, my luvly old 'Last Rose o' Summ'r'? Didn't hev eny ijee ye war goin' ter run yer snoot inter hornet's nest, last nite, did ye? Hei hei! we gobbled ye up, purty, now, d'dn't we? Best haul we've made in er month o' Sundays. Cuss ye, ye old slab-sided, squint-eyed crockydile, w'y in thunder don' ye, say suthin'? D'y'e want me ter smash ye one in the gob?"

"Thou wouldst not lay thy hand in anger upon an old and decrepit man, whom thou hast cruelly made a prisoner in thy ranks?"

"Oh! no, I wouldn't, would I? Bet yer garters I wouldn't. But, I'll tell ye w'at I would do—an' will do—that ar', punch ye rite square in their p'serogrammy, quicker 'n ye ken say Yank Doodgle, ef ye don' disgorge, onload yerself, upheave, onsling, spew up, all ye know erbout that she wench, Hurricane Nell, an' w'r she keeps herself, o' late."

"Whom dost thou mean by that most strange of all titles?" came from the disguised girl, in the same squeaky tones of the old beggar. "You have only to tell me of her, and I will try and remember if I have ever met her in my extended travels."

A curse escaped the ruffian's lips.

"See hyar!" he hissed, drawing and cocking a revolver; "now, d'y'e see this? Then 'i ye does, why jes' guv us no more'n yer soft soap. I don't suck such seed. Whar's ther gal, Hurricane Nell, tell me, or by the great snakes o' Snodgrass, I'll put a chunk o' cold le'd thru yer coakynut!"

"Shoot if thou darest, vile monster, but thou will only incur the wrath of God upon thy

head. Were you to kill me a dozen times, I wouldst not betray my trust, and inform you, bad man that you are, of the whereabouts of the maiden you would seek to destroy.

"All k'rect," replied Woolf, a sudden change seeming to come over him. "Jes' ye wait till we get ye down ter Cherry Run, an' ther rendezvous, an' then ye'll come ter time, I'll bet er plug o' terbaccey. Yaa, I'll make ye disgorge, or—"

He did not finish the sentence, but turned away, savagely.

The meal was soon dispatched, and the cavalcade made ready for the resumption of the journey.

One of the ruffians was left to follow on foot, while our heroine was securely bound onto the saddle of his horse, and allowed the privilege of riding, in preference to being carried in the arms of Cap'n Bob, whom she hated more and more, each time she gazed toward him.

When all was arranged, the men sprung into their saddles, and the band galloped away, Pill-Box leading the captive's horse, by means of a long lariat attached to the bit.

Away across the plains they sped during the life-long day and far into the following night, as if eager to escape to their Valley retreat.

About midnight they entered the same valley through which Cecil and the beautiful Deadshot had dashed on their return from Luke Rice's cabin; and in the course of a half-hour drew up in front of the larger of the several cabins.

Here all hands dismounted, and the disguised maiden was borne into a large dimly-lighted apartment, which at the time was occupied by some half a dozen white outlaws and Indians. These men arose with exclamations of surprise and curiosity, as Cap'n Bob entered with his captive, whom he rudely tumbled down into a corner, and gave a ruthless kick with his heavy boot.

Explanations were at once demanded of the cause of the band's strange return, and as to who was the singular-looking prisoner, all of which the chief volunteered to give, taking pains to interlard each word with a terrible curse or anathema.

By and by the rest of the band came in, and were greeted with cordiality by the outlaws.

At Woolf's expressed wish, several bottles of whisky were brought forth, and the assembled roughs began to gulp down the fiery liquid, as if it were nothing more than water.

Bottle after bottle was emptied, and before long the larger share of the band were in "prime fightin' order," and eager to discuss the manner of torture to be inflicted upon the prisoner, should he persistently refuse to make the desired disclosures.

"I tell ye w'at I think," growled Guzzler, savagely, at the same time hurling an empty bottle toward the trembling maiden's head. "Stick his hoofs in ther fire an' scorch 'em fer an hour. That'd fetch him ter his limerick."

"Or hang 'im by his heels, fer two days," suggested Pill-Box. "Thar's nothin' 's ekal et, fer tannin' refractory speerita."

"No," grunted Cap'n Bob, reflectively, "we won't do that. I've better plan. We'll wind him up on er windlass above er roarin' hot fire. Then we'll fix ther crank so's it'll let him down by inches. D'y'e see ther p'int?"

"Yas—yas!" howled the intoxicated demons. "An' he'll keep er descentin', lower 'n' lower, till he's plum in ther fire; then 'i he won't disgorge, let him sizzle, hey?"

"Perzactly!" leered Woolf. "We'll get ter work 't on't, an' build er windlass, ter w'ch we'll fasten ther reptyle, then, as et will take till mornin' fer him ter wind down, we'll le've him ter his warm'st reflexions, wi'er whoppin' big fire's under 'im; an' we'll kin back hyar an' git on er thunder'n' big drunk. What say ye?"

"Good! good!" yelled the ruffians.

"All k'rect, then. Git yer tools, all on ye—git axes, picks, shuvvells an' auggers—an' foller ma. Kim er long!"

The men armed themselves with the requisite implements, and Cap'n Bob led the way from the cabin, followed by the whole gang.

Hurricane Nell was left alone—alone, and with the prospect of an awful death staring her in the face.

As she lay there in the dimly-lit, whisky-scented room, and thought the situation over, in all its horrible reality, the echoing reverberations of the axes of her would-be executioners, came from out in the valley. They were preparing her scaffold, and she was doomed to a horrible death.

An hour went slowly by, and the echo of the axes and the mauldin yells of the ruffians ceased for awhile.

Then there came the tramp of many feet, the human savages burst into the cabin, and with awful yells seized their victim and bore her out into the black night to the newly-constructed windlass, where the rest of the gang were waiting. It was built something in the shape of a crane, one gigantic arm swinging out from the main shaft, from which hung a stout lariat, the end reaching almost to the ground, and being formed in the shape of a slipping-noose. This noose was placed over the prisoner's head and shoulders, and shurried to, about her waist.

Then at a word of the ruffian chief, four stout outlaws began turning a rude, squeaking crank, and Nell felt herself being drawn rapidly upward. She was presently stopped by the projecting arm of the crane, and the outlaws busied themselves in fixing the windlass so that it would unwind by degrees.

A fire of pitchy cones was kindled beneath the arm to which the brave girl was suspended, and the leaping flames and strong gas nearly choked and suffocated her.

Having finished their hellish work for the present, the ruffians hurried away to the rendezvous, to "liquor up."

From her aerial perch, Hurricane Nell watched the bed of fire below her, with a sort of fascination. It crackled and hissed, and leaped fiercely upward, as if trying to reach her with its fiery tongues.

Slowly the windlass unwinds.

An hour passes by, the fire burns as brightly as ever, and half the distance to the ground is accomplished.

Another hour, and—

The Girl Deadshot closes her eyes to keep out the horrid vision.

Three-quarters of an hour more.

She is hanging within a yard of the fire. It almost scorches her.

Suddenly a wild thought enters her brain as if by magic.

She allows her moccasined feet to descend into the fire. The flames leap wildly around her ankles, and burn fiercely at her leggings. They also burn the cords, and her feet are soon free from restraint, although severely burned.

Wild with the desire to get free, she then gave a fierce jerk at the windlass-rope—there was a snap, a quick, buzzing whirr, and the next instant she found herself precipitated into the fire. Scrambling hastily to one side, she found that she had plenty of slack rope at her command. She held it into the flames. It burned in twain. Heaven be praised—she was free, once more.

CHAPTER XVI

UNMASKED—HUNG BY THE HEELS.

ALL day long the cavalcade galloped on across the baked plain, and at nightfall drew rein, and pitched their camp under the cover of a small motte, similar to the one by which they had met the Mexican, Hidaglo.

Fires were kindled, and a few prairie chickens, that offered themselves as game, were killed, plucked and roasted.

A relishable repast was thus provided, to which the hungry whites and their darker red allies helped themselves without stint.

Then, as it was too early to think of sleeping, Cap. Woodchuck volunteered to amuse the crowd with a story or two, and in his droll,

comical way succeeded in bringing smiles to the faces of the most stoical of the savages.

"Specimen Brick," however, alone remained unmoved. He appeared very gloomy and morose, and did not manifest the least sign of amusement at the keen humor of the old ranger.

Hidaglo, on the contrary, was quite sociable and vivacious, and listened and laughed heartily with the rest, at Cap.'s yarns.

The evening passed quickly, and at last it was agreed that all should turn in.

"Do you think we can reach our destination by the morrow noon, Cap?" asked Cecil, as he rolled up a blanket for a pillow.

"Ya-si I opine we cu'd, ef we war wantin' tor," replied the ranger, taking a good-night bite from a formidable plug of tobacco; "but, bain's we don' wanter, I opine we ken't."

"What do you mean? It surely is necessary to make all haste possible?"

"Perzactly; sumtimes et mought, an' erg'in sumtimes et moughtn't—jes' as ther case happens ter slant, yer see. We mought pounce down inter Cherry Run, ter-morrer dinner-time, an' git licked like thunderashun, ef thet'd be ter our likein'. But, ef we sail in on 'em, ter-morrer nite, we'll jes' as like as not find 'em full o' corn-ju'ce; then, oh! Great Pellerkans! won't we dust ther leather, tho'!"

"Then, you intend remaining here till another night?"

"Percific Pellerkans! no; only till ter-morrer noon. We'll start on, then, an' reach ther valyeay a leetle arter dark."

"Well, so be it, then; but I should much rather risk the chances of victory or defeat, than to have Hurricane Nell suffer in the outlaw's power. She is very dear to me, and it makes me impatient to fly to her rescue, without delay."

"Yas, boyee, I kno' ye think a long lot o' her; but she's jes' as deer ter me, as she ar' ter ye, fer all that—Percific Pellerkans, yes!"

"But, pray, what has so strangely interested you in the behalf of this wild maiden? Are you a relative—?"

"Boyee, d'ye ever hear tell erbout old Bill Allen, ther Kansas Spotter?" interrupted the ranger, suddenly.

"No," replied Cecil, eying the ground, reflectively, "I can't say that I have."

"Wal, jes' lend me yer ear, an' I'll explain, so's ye'll understand things."

"Yeers ergo, ther war er certa'n county in Kansas, as war overrun wi' outlaws an' border-ruffians, in general, an' Bob Woolf war cheef-cook'n'-bottle-washer 'mong ther hull caboodle. Things war at er feerful state, an' murderin' an' ranch-burnin' war every-day ockerances, w'en Tom Winfield—glory be ter ther poor fellar—war put up fer sheriff, on one side, an' er thievin', sneakin' bummer, named Hotkiss, war slammed up, an' voted for, on t'other side, by ther border-rufyans. I war ter Tom's deputy-sheeriff, an' Bob Woolf war likeliest ter git in fer Hotkisses deputy."

"Wal, 'lexion kim, an' our side beat, tho' it war only by ther skin o' ther teeth, an' ther free slingin' erbeut' o' fists an' six-shooters. We jes' out-counted ther enemy two votes, an' shoved Tom inter offis. Poor feller! he serv'd only three months, w'en he war stabbed ter death, by sum o' Woolf's gang."

"I war offered his boots, but bein' uneddy-cated, I told 'em ter put in er smarter fellar, an' let me start arter ther rufyans, ter w'ich they ergreed."

"I started out on ther trail, an' made things lively, I kin tell ye, now."

"Every rough I see'd, I spotted, wi' er le'd pill, an' they soon got ter callin' me ther Kansas Spotter. Woolf an' his gang got ter be down on me bad, an' menny's ther time they've hed me in close quarters, but I ginnerally managed to slide through their fingers, an' escape."

"But ther time they set ther fire on ther plains, w'en I an' my wife war down wi' ther small-pox, war ther wust of all. Holy Pole-kats, yes! Ye've doubtless heerd how my gal escaped, an' has assumed ther perfession o' an avenger."

"Wal, I nevyer know'd she war livin', poor

thing, till the day o' the 4th, w'en she shot agin me. Arter nearly fryin' inter soap-fat, ther time o' thet fire, I crawled out, an' war reskied by these red-skins, hyar, who nursed me back ter life."

"And Hurricane Nell is your daughter?" ejaculated Cecil, extending his hand, warmly.

"She is, thank God, I can truly say et. She ar' all I hev ter love, now."

"But why do you wear that strange mask before your face?"

Woodchuck did not answer for several moments; then, it was only by way of quickly removing the skin covering, and disclosing his terrible countenance to the young lawyer.

Cecil shrunk back with a horrified cry.

"Great heaven!" he gasped, "that's awful!"

"Tain't purty, that's er fact," laughed the ranger, "but's better'n none!"

"And you owe this hideous disfiguration to the border ruffians!"

"Perzactly—an' to them erlone."

The two men continued to talk for some time, Cap. relating much that was hitherto unknown to Cecil.

By and by, however, they both fell asleep, and silence reigned supreme throughout the camp.

The night was intensely dark, and not even a star glimmered in the high vault of heaven. But a faint breeze was stirring, and therefore little noise was made to break the blank, deep monotony of nature's nocturnal repose.

It was well into the small hours, ere any stir was visible in the little camp. This stir was caused by the rude, uncouth ex-robbler, "Specimen Brick," as he raised himself upon his elbow, and peered around him. He counted the forms that were dimly outlined in the light of the expiring fire—counted them all over several times, as if to assure himself that all were there. He soon appeared satisfied on this point, and gave vent to a low, scarcely audible chuckle. They were all there, and what was more, were evidently sleeping soundly.

He remained in his half-upright position for several moments, then rose softly to his feet, and again glanced softly around him; then advanced stealthily toward where Cecil was lying, a savage light gleaming from his baleful eyes.

He reached the feet of the young lawyer, and glowered down savagely into the upturned face of the unconscious sleeper.

Not a muscle save the rising and falling of the broad chest moved.

"Curse him!" muttered the prowler, biting his teeth together, savagely. "I'll kill him—yes, kill him!"

He thrust his right hand inside his hunting-shirt, and brought forth a small liquor-flask. It was half filled with a black, sparkling fluid, which gave forth a peculiar odor.

"Ha!" he again hissed, uncorking the bottle, carefully, "how little I thought I should ever find use for oil of vitriol, when I brought this flask of it along, from the East. It is the very essence of hell itself. One drop upon the skin will eat in—eat in, to the very bones. Ah! this is sweet revenge—sweet revenge for the blows he gave me; and, by all that I hold sacred, I swear he shall receive the whole contents of this flask in his face!"

The man seemed transformed into a veritable demon. His eyes glared forth sparks of venomous light, and he trembled all over with a fiendish exultance. He reached forth the arm which held the fiery liquid, until his hand was directly over the face of the sleeper. He next tipped the bottle, slightly.

None of the vitriol came forth.

He tipped it further—further—fur—

A cold object was at this instant pressed against his cheek, which caused him to draw back with a start of horror.

He turned his head slightly around.

Hidaglo was standing close to his side; the muzzle of a gleaming pistol, held in the Mexican's hand, was pressed against the scoundrel's temple.

"Specimen Brick" trembled violently.

"Come!" whispered Hidaglo, his finger on the trigger, menacingly.

The villain obeyed, and the captor walked by his side, with the cocked pistol held close to his head.

They entered the motte, and walked through it to the opposite side.

Here the Mexican halted, and "Specimen Brick" felt called upon to also halt.

It was full a half-mile back to the camp, and there was no danger of being overheard.

"Aubrey Lee," said Hidaglo, fingering the trigger of his weapon, nervously, "give me that flask of vitriol."

The villain handed it over with an awful shudder.

"Aubrey Lee," repeated the Mexican, "give me all your weapons."

This order was reluctantly obeyed, and they were hurled away into the grass.

"Now," said the captor, "which do you propose to do—remain peaceably quiet, and allow me to bind you, hand and foot; or offer resistance, and compel me to lead you back to the camp, yonder, deliver you up to Cecil Burnett, and tell him of your attempt to consign him to a horrible death?"

"Curse you!" hissed the baffled man, "bind me, rather than that! I will not offer to hinder you."

Hidaglo chuckled. He could well afford to. It was "Specimen Brick" who had chuckled but a short time before.

"Lie down!" was the next command.

"Specimen Brick" obeyed, sullenly.

Thrusting the cocked pistol into his belt, Hidaglo produced some pieces of stout buckskin from his pockets, which he soon manufactured into thongs. He then securely bound the limbs of his prisoner, at the ankles, knees, wrists and elbows—bound him so tight that he involuntarily howled with pain.

"Shut up!" cried the captor, sternly—"but hold! I'll silence your music!"

He searched around and found a suitable piece of wood, which he fastened into the captive's mouth.

"There!" he said, triumphantly. "How do you feel now? Ha! ha! the serpent is at last caught in a strong net—soon he will be banished! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Specimen Brick" could only groan.

"Ha! ha! groan, groan—I like to hear it!" resumed Hidaglo; "'tis music in my ears. Ha! Aubrey Lee, you make a fine-looking ranger, to be sure—yes, a most active ranger. But would you not look better in your old shape—as the smooth-faced, oily-tongued banker's clerk? Let us see."

The Mexican knelt beside his prisoner, and in an instant had torn away the mass of grizzly beard, the frowsy eye-brows, and the wig of hair.

Aubrey Lee, the arch-villain, lay revealed beneath.

"He! he!" chuckled Hidaglo; "what a beautiful actor you were, Aubrey Lee. You would make a decided sensation, on any stage. But, I see you have a great curiosity to know to whom you are indebted; isn't it so? Well, listen, and I will tell you."

In the camp the night passed swiftly away, and morning dawned bright and rosy.

Cap. Woodchuck and Grinning Moon were the first to awaken, and they sprung hastily to their feet, for they had quite overslept themselves. The chief set about arousing the braves, while the ranger turned toward Cecil. As he did so, his eyes fell upon something which lay upon the young lawyer's breast—a package of considerable size, wrapped in stout, brown paper, and tied with red string. It had evidently been placed there by some one during the night.

"Hey, thar, Buster; wake up an' see w'at's on ye!" shouted Cap., curious to know what the package contained.

Cecil sprung from his sound slumber, in amazement.

"What is it?" demanded he, wildly staring about—"Indians?"

"No," laughed the ranger, "but Holy Pole-

kats! look thar! see w'at ye've drapp'd," and he pointed to the ground.

Cecil picked up the package, in a dazed sort of way, and turned it over and over in his hands, in greatest wonder. To the bottom was pinned a sheet of paper, which he at once detected. It was written with pencil, in a neat, feminine hand, and ran as follows:

"MR. CECIL GROVER:

"Dear Sir:—Enclosed in this packet you will find the exact amount stolen from your father's bank, except what was used by Aubrey Lee Lester in settling with the miners. I, his betrayed affianced, have been on his track for some time. He murdered your father—I saw him! He robbed your father's bank—he has just confessed it. He sought to ruin your sister—I have saved her. When you forbade his visiting her, he disguised himself as an ex-robber, and set out to murder you. He hoped by so doing, once more to be able to cast his infernal spell over your sister, and in the end, get back the Grover estates—thus coming into possession of two fortunes, by his villainy. In the disguise of Hidaglo, the Mexican, I have followed on his path to baffle him. To-night I found him almost in the act of saturating you with oil of vitrioll."

"I took him a prisoner, I bound and gagged him, and extorted from him a confession of all his crimes. He has led a blacker life than I had supposed. I got the money from him, and with this communication placed it on your breast, as you slept.

"I have prayed for him, long and earnestly, and now have hung him by the heels, a prey for the wolves! Go and see that what I say is true. You will find him in the center of the motte. Even while you are reading this, I am speeding far away. Have I done wrong? No! he doubly deserved a worse death. Remember me kindly, for such is the vengeance of the confiding, pure-hearted girl, whom Aubrey Lee Lester betrayed to her ruin. May God have mercy—

ADA KENT."

Silently and with palpitating hearts Cecil and the ranger turned and plunged into the timber, to assure themselves of the arch-fiend's death.

They had not far to go. They soon came to where a lifeless body was hanging, head downward, suspended from a limb to which he had been drawn by aid of a lariat. It was Aubrey Lee.

The wolves had not touched him, but retribution had overtaken him in the shape of a knife-thrust in the heart. Evidently Ada Kent had reconsidered her words, and concluded to kill him, herself, before departing.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TREE-TOP PRISONER.

YES, free was the Girl Deadshot, but sorely burned and begrimed with smoke and soot. But, how trifling was this as compared with the awful doom that had stared her in the face but a short time before. Enough to be thankful for it was that she had been permitted to escape, at all.

She turned from the spot, and sped across the valley to the eastern side, where a belt of timber seemed to offer her protection and shelter. Reaching this cover, she set about searching for some sharp projection of rock or knot over which she could saw the bonds that confined her wrists, and wear them asunder.

She found a sharp corner upon a neighboring boulder, and soon succeeded in freeing her hands. Then she stood alone in the depths of the woodland free.

Then from an inner pocket of her hunting-shirt, she drew forth something the ruffians had failed to discover—a pair of little silver-mounted revolvers, and a sheath knife, which she had carried concealed there, for years.

The knife she thrust into her belt, but the revolvers she concealed inside the hunting-shirt again, for, in case she should be recaptured by the robbers, she desired to keep herself armed.

Now for work!

Hurrying along through the wood, she soon came to the eastern boundary. Before her stretched away a vast ocean of rolling prairie, treeless and seemingly limitless. Far ahead through the pall of gloom, she could trace the clouds down to the horizon, which was marked by a faint tinge of purplish white. This told her that day-dawn was not more than an hour distant, at the most.

"The first thing necessary," she mused, "is to get possession of a rifle—mine, if possible."

She turned back in the direction of the valley, and in hurrying along, she suddenly came upon a well-beaten trail. It ran in a northerly and southerly course, and was evidently a horse-path, it being wide and well-worn.

With a smile of satisfaction she followed the path cautiously toward the north, and in course of half an hour came in sight of the corral. It was a large yard built by laying rails from tree to tree, and was filled with animals belonging to the outlaws. All were turned loose, and the saddles, bridles and other equipments were hung to the fence.

An Indian was reclining upon a bunk of leaves, just outside the corral, and though he was probably left there for the purpose of watching the horses, the heroic girl soon assured herself that he was fast asleep.

Creeping like a panther upon him, she grasped him fiercely by the throat, and the next instant his life blood was dying the leaves beneath where he lay, and he was dead. Then she relieved him of his weapons, which consisted of a brace of pistols, a tomahawk and rifle. Thus armed for an emergency, she hurried away to the southwest, for the purpose of noting how matters stood in the valley.

Advancing slowly to cover her trail as she went, she soon came within thirty yards of the boundary.

This was quite as far as she cared to go, therefore she halted and glanced searchingly above and around her.

In a few moments she singled out a tree suitable for her purpose, and proceeded to climb it. The tree was a giant fir—the only one of the species in the vicinity—and towered high above its neighbors, like a monarch, in its pride. It was covered with thick, wide-spreading branches, and from its top could be commanded an extensive view of the surrounding country.

Hurricane Nell experienced no difficulty in mounting the tree, and soon was at an altitude of a hundred feet.

Before her lay spread out one vast, glorious expanse of landscape, just now blushing under the mellow tints of the early morning sun.

To the north, to the south, to the east, and to the west rolled the billowy ocean of green prairie, beyond which stretched away the baked, parched plains. Right at her feet nestled the picturesque little depression known as Cherry Valley, while directly behind and below her spread out the belt of timber. She was on an average of thirty feet above the surrounding tree-tops, and securely hidden from view in among a bower of matted fir branches.

She could see the cabins in the valley, and the spot whereon was erected the terrible windlass, which was to have been her death gallows.

Not a stir was visible about the Rendezvous, but this did not deceive the maiden. She knew that doubtless her enemies had apprised themselves of her escape and were even now either searching in the forest, or lying in wait for her appearance from covert.

The forenoon passed away slowly, and no sign of life was seen in the valley. The sun crossed the meridian and commenced its downward journey toward the western horizon.

Still Hurricane Nell kept up a vigilant watch on every side, her mind becoming more settled to the thought that mischief was brewing.

About an hour before sunset, as she was scanning the prairie to the eastern side of the timber, she was startled to see a man rise suddenly out of the grass, and gaze steadily toward the top of the tree in which she was concealed.

Had he discovered her?

It was a horrifying thought.

She had no trouble in recognizing him as one of Woolf's band; in fact, it was the notorious Guzzler, one of Cap'n Bob's picked confederates, and one who had been with the ruffian chief, at the time of the great prairie fire.

Should she shoot him?

It would take a well-aimed bullet to fetch him, for he was distant something over a hundred yards. He continued to stare directly toward the retreat, as if suspicious, but yet doubtful.

Her rifle lay resting across a limb, bearing on a level with his head. The muzzle was turned upon him. Should she risk a shot?

She picked up the weapon and cocked it, with a little shiver. She brought it to her shoulder, then hesitated.

"Tis murder!" she murmured—"but bah! I am faltering. It shall not be. Such is not vengeance. I will shoot him, and may God have mercy on his soul!"

She ran her eye along the barrel, without a tremor, she brought the weapon to bear upon the ruffian's breast, and fired. A sharp, whip-like crack rung out on the still afternoon; then there was a yell of pain and rage, and springing wildly into the air, Guzzler fell forward prostrate upon the earth—dead!

The bullet had proven a deadshot.

Simultaneous with his fall, there rung out loud and discordant yells from the depths of the forest, and full two score of border-ruffians leaped from under cover, and hurried toward their comrade. But he was beyond all aid they could render. The ball had gone home, true to the centre of the heart.

Wildly glanced the outlaws around in every direction, for a glimpse of the murderer, but they failed to glance up into the retreat in the fir top, where sat Hurricane Nell, watching them with a smile of blended triumph and pity.

Night fell black and breathless. Not a breath of air was stirring, and a strange, weird blank of quiet seemed to prevail.

Far down in among the treetops, the Deadshot occasionally caught a glimmer of light, coming from a camp-fire. She presently distinguished enough to convince her that the ruffians were scattered around the edges, and through the timber. Did they know she was somewhere within the forest, and were they intending to starve her out of her retreat?

The night passed, and placing herself in as comfortable position as her close quarters would admit she managed to catch a few hours sleep.

In the early light of morning she awoke, with a knowledge that she was very hungry.

Since the morn when she had partaken of prairie fowl, in the outlaw camp, not a morsel had passed her lips! How could she hope to procure food, when the wood below her was swarming with her enemies.

She resolved to attempt a descent, under the cover of the next darkness, hazardous as it might be.

The day wore slowly by, and night succeeded it, blank and breathless as had been the previous one. About midnight, as near as she could determine, Hurricane Nell began her descent, weak and faint, but from limb to limb she lowered herself, stealthily and carefully, and in the course of half an hour was rewarded by touching the ground. Here she stopped and listened. All was dark and silent around her.

For an hour she hovered around through the timber like a restless spirit. Now she was close upon the camps of the enemy; then she would search around through the gloom for something to appease her hunger.

She found that there was no chance of escaping, for the present, at least. The ruffians had repossessed themselves of their animals, and a barrier of guards surrounded the wood, in addition to those around the camp-fires.

At last she stumbled across what was evidently a remnant of some of the outlaws' meals. It was a neck-piece of a deer, and had been thrown aside as being unrelishable.

Hurricane Nell seized it with avidity, and

hurriedly ascended to her aerial retreat. When morning dawned, she carefully cleaned and devoured it without a murmur.

Not a sign did she discover of the enemy, during that long day.

When night fell once more over the earth the brave girl resolved to risk another descent in search of food. But a short time was consumed in reaching the ground, and she prowled around, here and there, as on the previous night.

No stray bits of food were to be found, however, and after two hours of vain search, she resolved to wait till the following night, when she might stand a better show. With this decision, she returned to the giant fir, and grasping a lowermost branch was about to draw herself up into the tree, when without a word, four men sprung out from the darkness, seized her, and bore her to the ground, to bind her, hand and foot.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GREATEST SHOTS OF ALL.

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared one of the four ruffians, exultantly, "so we've got yer, have we, ye geelorous old rack-bones? Kotched ye right in the act, now didn't we? Take hold, ye Ku-klux and Bummer; an' ye, Pill-Box, go tell the captin' that we've got the old 'un. We'll keert him over ter the Rendezvous!"

Hurricane Nell was borne out of the timber and across the valley, into the cabin known as the Rendezvous.

Here she was tumbled into a corner, and left to think over the situation, while her captors proceeded to light a half-dozen torches, and rummage the premises for liquor, which they soon found, and seating themselves near the door, drank heartily, as they waited for the coming of the remainder of the band.

An hour elapsed, but no sounds of the robbers' approach.

Hurricane Nell lay quietly where she had been deposited, anxiously considering the inevitable result of her recapture. She well knew Cap'n Bob would now be more savage than before, and that she need not hope to escape this time. Death in its most horrible shape was in store for her; there was no way she could avert it.

Then her thoughts reverted to Cecil, and tears welled to the poor girl's eyes. For years she had lived her wild, strange life, with no one to love, no one to pity her in hours of distress. Life had had no bright side to her; nothing to encourage the desire of living in the cold, cruel world longer than she should fulfill her oath of vengeance.

Now, all was so changed!

Now, she longed to live; she had met and loved one who was very dear to her, and life was so sweet!

And yet, death was so very near!

She shuddered at the realization of her peril. Slowly but surely the night wore away, and finally morning dawned.

The ruffians at the cabin were puzzled and anxious about the mysterious conduct of their comrades; and Ku-klux had arisen and was preparing to go over and ascertain what was the matter, when Pill-Box was discovered creeping stealthily toward the cabin, like a snake. He exercised much caution, and several moments elapsed ere he succeeded in making his singular advent among his friends.

To their questions, he soon gave an explanation. The camp-fire of an enemy had been discovered off on the plains, from the top of the sentinel fir.

Cap'n Bob and several of the gang were even now in the aerial retreat, keeping a sharp lookout. The rest of the band were dispersed through the timber to watch for the supposed enemy's approach.

With these disclosures, Pill-Box again crawled back toward the timber, and left his comrades to themselves and their whisky.

The Deadshot had overheard the conversation, and a great throb of hope and expectation entered her heart. Were friends coming

to her rescue, and was Cecil among them? Oh! how earnestly she prayed that it would prove so, and that they would succeed in effecting her release!

The forenoon sped, and just as the sun was at the meridian, triumphant yells and screeches were heard over near the timber, followed by the tramping of many feet; and soon the larger part of the band came rushing toward the cabin, headed by Cap'n Bob and Pill-Box, who dragged between them a bound and helpless prisoner.

It was the young lawyer, Cecil Grover!

To explain his presence here, will require but a few moments.

Subsequent to the finding of the body of Aubrey Lee Lester, a consultation held at the camp decided that Cecil and Grinning Moon should go on in advance of the main party, and keep a secret watch on Cherry Valley, and the movements of the enemy. So the two men had set out and had reached the vicinity of the forest about noon. Here they separated, Grinning Moon creeping off in a circuitous route to get beyond the timber, while Cecil entered the forest with the intention of mounting the giant fir, which he had perceived from the plain.

Cap'n Bob had viewed the approach of the two spies, and had laid his plans accordingly. No sooner had Cecil reached the heart of the wood, than he was closed in and pounced upon, by a swarm of ruffians, and taken a prisoner ere he could draw a weapon.

Leaving a sentinel to watch in the tree-top, and six of his followers to pursue the Pawnee chief, Woolf announced it his intention to put the spy and the old vagrant, Uncle Sam, to death without further delay. Therefore, they had set out for the Rendezvous, with hideous yell of exultation.

The advent into the cabin was hailed with tipsy shrieks by the three guards, and taking partners the whole guard performed an impromptu dance about the apartment.

As Cecil's eyes rested upon the prisoner in the corner, he started visibly, but a warning shake of her head forbade the exclamation which was on the end of his tongue.

As soon as Woolf could restore quiet in the ranche, by several hideous curses, the plan of torture was discussed, by which the captives were to meet their death.

Some proposed casting them into the snake-pit; others voted burning at the stake as best suited to the case, while some even proposed skinning alive!

Cap'n Bob, however, vetoed all these proposals. He bitterly remembered the blows he had received from Cecil, and wanted to invent some mode of torture, which, while it would cause his enemy the most excruciating pain, would not materially injure him. He had not failed to notice the strangely pitying glances exchanged between the captives, and he at once construed them into being signs of friendship.

Accordingly, he resolved upon a plan at once cruel and fiendish.

Cecil's bonds were tightened until they cut into the flesh, and he could not stir a hand or foot. He was then placed with his back against the wall, at the far end of the apartment, and securely banded to the wall with numerous toughened strips of buffalo skin, placed across his person, from the forehead to ankles, and nailed into the logs at each end. When this operation was completed the young lawyer was as immovable as a mountain of rock. For the life of him he could not move a single limb or muscle.

The next act on the programme was the order from Woolf, that every man administer the prisoner a slap in the face, with the flat of their hands, which order was promptly obeyed.

When each had struck him one right out from the shoulder, Cecil's visage presented an odd appearance, the color somewhat resembling the shade of a blue berry.

Seeing that no cry of pain was extorted from the prisoner, Woolf set about preparing a torture still more inhuman.

Going to a chest in a distant corner, he succeeded in bringing to light his hand full of

peas, and also a bit of pitch. By aid of the pitch he stuck one of the peas exactly upon the end of Cecil's nose, thereby not in the least enhancing that ill-treated young gentleman's beauty.

All the ruffians were arranged on the opposite side of the room with drawn revolvers, and then Cap'n Bob turned and cut the bonds of the supposed vagrant.

"Hyar!" he said, gruffly, selecting out the Deadshot's own rifle, and handing it to her, "thar's yer gun. Ye must shute ther pea frum the Buster's snout. I guv ye five chances, an' ef ye don't fetch ther pea ther fifth time, et'll be yer doth wurrant; fer each o' ther b'ees, hyar, shall plug erway at ye till ye ain't got er spark o' life 'n' ye!"

Hurricane Nell trembled as she took the rifle. Here was a contingency she least expected to meet.

She was forced under the penalty of death to shoot a small-sized pea from the extreme end of Cecil's nose!

What if she should fail?

Death would be the result.

Or, should she vary a hair's breadth in her aim, she might put a bullet through that not the least essential of her lover's possessions. The idea of depriving him of his nose, as may easily be supposed, was both repugnant and horrifying to her, and she drew back with a shudder.

"Go'n!" roared Cap'n Bob, drawing and cocking a revolver, "or, by ther saints 'n' purgatory, I'll blow yer brains out!"

Seeing that resistance was useless, the brave girl seized her rifle and took a position at the side of the room, pointed out by Woolf, from where she could obtain a side view of Cecil's face, and consequently a fair aim at the end of his nose and the pea.

The distance between the remarkable target and the end of her rifle was about twenty-five feet, and she knew that if at all, she could not hope to succeed, before the fifth and last shot. If she missed then, she knew what she might expect. It would be—death! Deliberately she raised her rifle to bear. The gang watched with feverish interest. Before them, as they thought, stood an old and decrepit beggar trembling on the verge of the grave, who was about to attempt a feat that none of them could hope ever to accomplish.

Would he succeed?

They judged not—ay, hoped not, for, ferocious savages as they were, nothing could have pleased them more than to have seen Uncle Sam send a misdirected bullet crashing through the prisoner's somewhat swollen nose.

Once, twice, and thrice, the Deadshot raised the weapon she held, on a level with the target, and as many times lowered it. She was nervous—she dare not fire until she could school herself sufficiently for the task.

"Go'n, curse ye!" yelled Cap'n Bob, exulting, as he saw her arm tremble. "Go'n, or by ther power o' brimstun, I'll fire at ye, an' send yer earthly kerreer!"

Once more Hurricane Nell brought her rifle to bear, with a quick, angry movement, and scarcely taking time to glance between the sights, fired!

The ruffians crowded eagerly forward, and they uttered an applauding screech as they perceived that the bullet had dashed the pea away, without drawing blood on the tip of Cecil's nose!

It was a most wonderful shot, indeed.

"Big shootin', ole hoss, big shootin'" said Cap'n Bob, admiringly. "I'll put up ernuther mark, an' ef ye'll hit it, by ther thunder o' Mosis, I'll let up on ye fer a week, an' guv ye er chance ter sing an' pray in'!"

"You are kind!" was the sarcastic reply.

"No, I hain't nuther, so spare yer lip. See 'f ye call this kind!"

So saying, the ruffian chief seized a tomahawk lying near and advanced swiftly toward the captive. Our heroine for a moment grew pale, as she thought he was about to inflict some further injury upon Cecil. But, she was not less horrified, at what she next saw.

Pinching Cecil's ears back against the wall,

the wretch drew from the folds of his hunting-sabre two needles, such as are used by hunters in sewing buckskin. These he thrust straight through the captive's ears, and gave a few light taps with the flat of the tomahawk.

The ears were firmly nailed to the wall!

Cecil could not restrain a loud groan at this barbarous treatment, and the ruffians mocked him in his misery.

"Thar!" yelled Cap'n Bob, triumphantly, "now, old rack-bones, seein' yer sich er hefty shooter, p'aps ye kin drive them ar needles futher inter ther wall. G'on! cuss ye; an' reckerleot w'at ye'll git, if ye fail."

A wild, strange gleam shot into the maiden's eyes.

"Will you set us both free, and give us five minutes start on our horses, if I'll put a head on each of those needles, there?" she demanded, eagerly.

Cap'n Bob turned to his companions.

"Yes—yes!" they all cried, as in one voice; "ef ther old cuss ken do that, by ther old Satan, he merits liberty!"

"Then, et shall be so!" assented the chief, turning to the Deadshot.

"On your honor?"

"Ay—on all our honors!"

Hurricane Nell smiled, contemptuously, but did not reply.

In order that she might obtain an exact front view of the target, she was permitted to stand in the cabin door, while the outlaws were formed on either side of her, inside the apartment.

Having reloaded her rifle, she took her position, raised the weapon, and glanced along the sights.

The next instant there was a quick, ringing report, and a bullet went whizzing home to its mark.

In the excitement of the moment, the ruffians had put up their weapons, and as the Deadshot fired, they all, as of one accord, rushed forward to see the result. A man outside the cabin, who had been waiting for such a chance, now gave vent to a low whistle.

Then, as he leaped forward and snatched the maiden from the door, and bore her to one side, a motley swarm of Pawnee savages poured into the Rendezvous with yells of triumph and victory.

Taken wholly by surprise, the ruffians could hardly understand the unexpected onset, until high above the din caused by pistol-shots, the clashing of knives, and the furious curses, roared the stentorian voice of the redoubtable Woodchuck:

"Whoop! Whoop! at 'em, reds, at 'em. Slit, haggle an' mash 'em! show no mercy. Holy Polekata and Perciflic Pellerkans! Sock et to 'em! Elevate their ha'r! choke off ther safety-valve! Rip 'em! slit 'em and scrouge 'em. Hoop! hurra!"

Then the awful roar and din of the terrible conflict drowned the ranger's words, and the battle waged on.

The outlaws were armed with only revolver and knife, having left their rifles in stack outside the door, but they did fearful execution with these.

One by one the Pawnees fell, and their brawny forms were spurned aside to make room for the others.

The ruffians dropped at every shot or thrust of the enemy, and for a time it was doubtful in whose favor the bloody contest would terminate.

But this point was soon settled; the ruffians began to weaken.

Like a giant demon, the stalwart Kansas Spotter darted hither and thither, urging on his handful of trained warriors, and dealing blows of vengeance here and there, each moment.

By his hand fell the notorious Bob Woolf and Pill-Box, and after their death the fighting was short and decisive. One by one the ruffians fell, until but a single man was left, and he was reserved to be handed over to the law.

Doubtless, many of the residents of Pike's Peak, yet remember that memorable day that

witnessed the hanging of the arch-villain, Ku-Klux Sam.

After the battle Cecil Grover was released, more dead than alive, and Woodchuck conducted him to the cabin, near the Rendezvous, where Grinning Moon had carried the Deadshot.

The last shot of Hurricane Nell, most wonderful to relate, did not touch Cecil's ear, but had struck fairly and squarely upon the end of the needle; thereby manufacturing a *pin out of the needle!*

Arrived at the cabin, Woodchuck and Cecil were surprised and delighted to find themselves not in the presence of Uncle Sam, the vagrant Earl, but instead, in the presence of Hurricane Nell, the Girl Deadshot.

The meeting between father and daughter was affectionate and tearful as Cap. Woodchuck revealed to her his identity.

After long years of trial and suffering they had by God's kind beneficence been permitted to emerge from the cloud of wrong, hatred and vengeance, into the pure freedom and peace of reunion and a better existence.

Years have passed. Away down in the beautiful lands of Texas dwell he who well merits the title of a hero, Cecil Grover, Esq., and his beauteous wife, who in former days was widely known as Hurricane Nell.

With a share of the stolen money, so strangely returned by Ada Kent, they live in a style becoming their position in life, and most of all, are happy in the wealth of their united love.

Down from the far northwest there comes as regularly as bloom to the May flowers, two strange and uncouth visitors to the Grover hacienda.

Long may they live, for they are no others than Cap. Woodchuck—to which title he still clings—and his "right bower," Grinning Moon!

And with the announcements that Miss Lotta has lately wedded a distinguished army officer, that Mrs. Grover, Sr., resides with her daughter, and that the worthy Jonas Dwight still flourishes, I bring this story to an

THE END.

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